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Harlequin Presents

LILIAN
PEAKE

the little impostor



THE LITTLE IMPOSTOR

Lilian Peake

Shaun's laughter rang out just as Carp reached the door. She couldn't help overhearing what he said to his aunt.

"You're not implying that I'm attracted to Cara Hirst," he said, astonishment in his voice. "My dear aunt, a man would have to be desperate to feel the faintest stirrings of desire for that overgrown schoolgirl."

Cara felt humiliated. Despite all that had taken place between them, this was what Shaun really thought of her. Never, she vowed, would she let him know her feelings for him!

CHAPTER ONE

'You're doing the wrong thing, Cara,' Steven Griffiths said as he waited for the traffic lights to change to green. 'You don't know how wrong. To resign like that without another job to go to--'

'And you know why, Steve.' The car jerked forward and Cara laughed humourlessly. 'I only passed that hurdle career, that's all.'

'But you've got all your qualifications. You passed your exams, you did your year's teaching practice.'

Cara laughed humorlessly. 'I only passed that hurdle by the grace and favour of the head of that particular school. "It's your inexperience," he said. "As you go on, you'll learn how to handle a class." Little did he know that after I've spent three years as a full-time, fully-fledged member of the teaching profession, every single class I take still walks metaphorically all over me. Literally, too, if they had half a chance!'

'I suppose you realise,' Steven crashed the gears and cursed under his breath, 'that you've done yourself a load of no good by resigning from one school without having a job in another lined up? Think what it would look like on an application form.' He jammed on the brakes at a pedestrian crossing. 'You wouldn't stand a chance. Your record would be suspect.'

'I wouldn't even get as far as an interview,' Cara said bitterly. 'The head warned me I might not, because whenever he was asked to supply a reference on my teaching ability, he would, in all honesty, have to hint at my disciplinary troubles.'

'The trouble with you,' said Steven gloomily, 'is that you didn't shout at the kids enough. You let them get the upper hand, and once any teacher does that he—or she—has had it.'

Cara sighed. 'How much farther is it?' She patted her middle. 'I've got butterflies. I wish the interview was behind me.'

'And that's another thing,' said Steven. 'You read some damn fool advertisement in the paper for a companion-help to some filthy rich old woman, and without a moment's thought, you apply for the job. Yow, a companion-help! You with your intelligence, your qualifications, trotting around doing the bidding of some ill-tempered--'

'How can you pre-judge someone you've never met? She might be a perfect angel.'

'Houses might fly! What "angel" would put in the advertisement—what was it?'

Cara said, closing her eyes in the effort of remembering, 'The applicant must be single and intending to remain so. No person with marriage in mind need apply. The use of cosmetics is banned. Uniform must be worn at all times.'

'Including in bed?' Steven asked with a grin. 'It's a wonder she didn't add, "No followers, swains or suitors permitted." What century is the woman living in? Not the twentieth, that's obvious.'

'The salary's good,' Cara said, trying to ignore the truth in Steven's words. 'I'll probably be up against stiff opposition.'

'Opposition my eye! Only someone as stupid as you would go for a job with those stipulations attached to it.'

'Thanks,' said Cara sarcastically.

'Cara, love, you know I didn't mean it that way. You're my girl. When we've both got some more money put away to buy us a decent house, we'll get married. I'd go out and buy you a ring tomorrow, if you weren't so hell-bent on playing doormat to some stiff-necked old dowager.'

'It's no good, Steve. I'm not going to sit and twiddle my thumbs while you do all the earning for that dream house we're going to buy ourselves one day.' She took a letter from her pocket. 'The Cardosa Hotel. We surely can't be far now*'

'We're practically on the doorstep. There's the front entrance, but I'll turn down this side street and park at a parking meter in case the old girl's got her spies out checking up on whether "the applicant" has a boy-friend in tow with "marriage in mind".' He manoeuvred the car into a vacant space and leant over to kiss her. 'Terrible though you look,' he said, 'I still love you.'

Indignantly Cara looked down at herself. 'What was the use of making myself look attractive? How could I put on make-up when the advertisement said--'

'I know, I know. But you needn't have made yourself look like your own granny!' He looked down. 'Lace-up shoes, a blanket for a skirt and a coat that looks as if it was bought at a pre-war—First World War—rummage sale!'

She opened the car door and closed it again. 'Steve, I'm scared.'

'Don't be, love. I don't care if you don't get the job. Who's doing the interviewing?'

'Mrs. Driver's representative, the letter said.'

'Male or female?' Cara shook her head. She did not know. 'Well, if it's male, he'll take one look at you, clap his hand to his head and think, "Good grief, is this something the cat brought in?" Then he'll give you the job!'

Steve grinned, dived out of the car to evade the swinging hand and opened the passenger door to help Cara out. He looked up and down the road to make sure they were not being observed, gave her a quick kiss on her mouth and melted away into the interior of the car.

The interviewer was male. This much Cara gathered as the porter knocked on a door and opened it at the summons to enter. 'Male', Cara thought in between the frightened pulsing of her heart, was an accurate description. He was so tall it took her eyes a few seconds to find their way from the table at which he was standing to the face above it. He was dressed in a suit with a cut that only an ample supply of money could secure.

The jacket sat well across the striking breadth of his shoulders, and draped loosely over the hand that had been pushed into a pocket. His attitude was casual, but his watchful expression showed without doubt that his brain was hard at work.

At first his features seemed a blur and it took Cara a few moments to sort them into their correct positions. When she had finished and found the eyes amongst the jigsaw pieces, she wished agitatedly that she had left the puzzle unsolved. Because it was the eyes which tore her apart, piece by piece. Every item of clothing she was wearing, from the 'rummage sale' coat to the 'blanket of a skirt', underwent a scrutiny which would have made a scarecrow squirm.

All this, she thought, from someone who was merely Mrs. Driver's representative. If Mrs. Driver herself had chosen to do it, she would not have grumbled. The woman would have had every right to inspect in detail the girl who would be her constant companion for some time to come. But this man, this—this arrogant stranger, with his cold brown eyes, his square chin, his hard mouth, what right had he, as a mere 'representative', to subject her to such a coldly appraising examination?

'Your coat?' The hard line of that mouth did not soften with even a hint of friendliness as the hand came out for the garment from the rummage sale.

Cara shrank even more into its bulging folds. 'Thank you, I—I'll keep it on.'

The hand remained extended. 'The hotel is both centrally heated and air-conditioned. The temperature may be March outside, but inside it's summer heat. Your coat.'

The man was stubborn and perverse. He had no right to insist that she should remove her coat. She had not reckoned on doing so. The interview, she had assumed, would be I short, penetrating and decisive. It was not usual at an interview to be asked to take anything off. She blushed at the thought. And it was on this assumption that she had not bothered to change the white ribbed sweater she was wearing, but had merely removed her denim pants and jacket, replacing them with what Steve had called her 'granny outfit'.

Not even in her wildest dreams had she believed she would be asked to take off her coat. Because under that coat was a shape which would certainly not cause a man to clasp his hand to his head and wonder if 'this was what the cat brought in'. It was an outline which would make him wonder if he was in fact entertaining a future Miss World.

That hand did not lower. It remained imperiously outstretched. It was not to be denied. Slowly, haltingly, the coat was peeled off shoulders, back and arms. It was handed over to that hand. It was held, poised in the air for a breath-holding moment while those male eyes half-closed, examined—and grew even colder, if that were indeed possible. Then the coat was tossed on to a chair and the hand that had held it motioned towards another chair, lower, softer and more reclining, inviting the occupant to stretch out and relax and take life as it came.

Cara perched on the edge of it, tense, pale and anxious. Was the interview over before it had begun? Had Mrs. Driver's representative been so shocked by what he had seen—the attractiveness she had endeavoured to hide, the marriage potential no applicant was allowed to possess— that he had made up his mind instantaneously to tell her she was unfitted for the job?

'Your name?'

Couldn't the man read? It was there on the form she had filled in. 'Cara Hirst.'

'Age?'

That was there, too! A simple act of adding and subtracting would have given him the answer, but she replied, 'Twenty-four.'

The dark eyebrows rose. It was almost as if he did not believe her. 'According to this form your birthday is in September. It is, at this moment, March.'

So he could read *and* do arithmetic, after all! Cara looked down at her entwined fingers. 'I mean—I mean, twenty-three and a half.'

'Occupation?'

Why was he asking so many questions to which, if he would only lower his eyes and read her writing, he would find the answer for himself? And how could she tell him— 'I was a teacher, but I'm not now because I gave up my job. I'm nothing now. I'm unemployed, one of the hundreds of thousands who have no work to go to every morning, no train to catch, no office door to open, no blackboard to write on ...'

No, she couldn't say any of that to this man. She could never let him discover what a mess she had made of her life, how her world had fallen about her ears when the headmaster had called her into his study two months before and told her that if the examination results of her classes didn't improve, if she didn't start keeping better order and keep the undisciplined rabble quiet...

Quietly, without looking at him, she answered, 'I was a teacher.'

There was a pause, then, 'Was? Past tense? You've given it up?'

Should she tell him the truth—no, it's given *me* up? She glanced at his face. It was cold and impersonal. It was not a face that invited confidences. He was there as a representative, probably a member of some employment agency, perhaps even the owner of the agency himself. Whatever he was, she would never see him again. She was not going to pour out her heart to this detached, disinterested individual.

She side-stepped the question, rather cleverly she thought. 'The name of my employers is on the form I filled in.' Would he be satisfied with her reply? She sighed with relief at his next statement. It seemed it had satisfied him.

'You're an historian, I see.'

She frowned. 'Historian? I don't look upon myself as that. Just a simple teacher of history.'

His mouth quirked with a passing amusement at her self-deprecatory answer. But the amusement was touched with irony. 'You have a

commendable qualification in your subject, Miss Hirst. False modesty never did impress me.'

His arrogance was too much! It sparked off an uncharacteristic eruption of temper. 'Look, Mr.—Mr.--'

He did not supply the missing name, which put her at an immediate disadvantage. 'I really don't see why I should subject myself to this—this inquisition and—and series of calculated insults merely because I filled in a form applying for a job which has nothing whatsoever to do with teaching or history. I was given to understand that I was applying for a post as companion-help to--'

'Why do you want this job?'

His question winded her. Because I'm desperately in need of employment. Nothing else would make me want to turn myself into a doormat for a rich, pampered old lady--

'Because,' she lied, 'I feel I could—I could do well at it. Because it would be new, challenging——'

Again he did not let her finish. 'You consider you have the right personality?'

No, she thought. 'Yes,' she said.

'You have the patience and the thoughtfulness? The docility, the meekness, the obedience required for such a post?'

She took a breath, ran her tongue over her lips. 'I— I--She swallowed. 'I think so.'

Slowly he shook his head. What was the matter? Didn't he believe her? Was he turning her down? 'After that display of temper a few moments ago, when I accused you of false modesty?'

'That's not fair!' she blazed. 'That was an unwarranted attack on my character.'

An eyebrow lifted, a smile flitted humourlessly across his face. 'You see what I mean.'

So she had lost her temper again! She rose, clutching her bag with one hand and pushing her shoulder-length fair hair with the other. The door seemed a long way off.

'Thank you for taking the trouble to interview me, Mr.—

Mr.--' She drew a sharp breath. 'Don't bother to pay my expenses. I'm withdrawing my application. You can tell Mrs. Driver, who is employing you to interview people on her behalf, that as far as Cara Hirst is concerned, she, Mrs. Driver, had a lucky escape, thanks to your vigilance, your cunning questions, your penetrating interrogation and your undoubted ability to trip me into revealing my true character, instead of the tamely docile personality I was pretending to possess!'

'Miss Hirst, your coat.'

He was approaching across the room, the rummage sale garment held at arm's length. As she took it, he moved round her and put his back to the door.

'It's usually,' he said, 'the privilege, the right of the interviewer to bring the discussion to an end, not the person being interviewed. Please resume your seat.'

There was something in his voice that quelled her rebellion and made her obey.

Having watched her return to the chair she had been occupying, then drape the coat across her lap, he hitched himself on to a corner of the table and folded his arms. 'Tell me something. Do you or don't you want this job?'

She looked up at him, failed to hold his gaze and looked away. 'Yes, Mr.--'

'Smith.'

'Smith.'

'You're aware, perhaps, that Mrs. Flora Driver is a very rich woman?'

'I guessed she was from the salary she was willing to pay.'

'That high salary is not given for nothing. She demands in return complete and absolute devotion to duty, a young woman who will dance attendance on her day—and sometimes night. A selfless creature who will take orders—however unpleasantly given—without question, without protest. Are you, do you think, that person?'

Cara swallowed and looked up hesitantly. 'Surely— surely that's up to you to decide.'

'Right. You wish me to be truthful?'

Cara stroked the coat across her lap. She nodded.

'I think you're the wrong person.'

Slowly she rose. She felt inordinately disappointed. 'There's nothing more to be said, is there?'

A hand came out, cautioning her. 'I have answered your question. Now answer mine. Do you consider you're right for the job?'

It took her a long time to reply. It was not a habit of hers to lie, but something beyond her powers compelled her to say, in a whisper, 'Yes, I think I am.'

The man called Smith straightened. 'So be it. The job is yours, Miss Hirst.'

It was a long journey to Cara's new place of work. Steven had given her a lift to the station, carried her cases along the platform and kissed her goodbye.

They must correspond, he had said. Somehow they must keep in touch. 'The old girl can't hold you incommunicado. You'll have to phone me from a call box on your days off.'

'Whatever you do, Steve,' Cara had said, 'don't phone me.'

'But it's a hotel you'll be living in, isn't it?' Steve had said. 'She can't listen in on an extension, not in a hotel.'

'Somehow Mrs. Driver would find out,' Cara answered. 'So *please* be discreet.'

Steven had hugged her then. 'Promise me you'll get the next train back if you can't stand it.'

'The money's good, Steve.'

'That's the only reason I'm letting you go. If you're unhappy there, I'd rather us live in one room in a basement than have you slaving your guts out for an old ...' The rest was lost as the train gathered speed and Steven disappeared from sight.

Cara settled down for a long journey. Mrs. Driver, it appeared, was currently living at a large hotel on the northeast coast of England. Islands View Hotel, it was called. She had no home of her own, but preferred instead to occupy a suite of rooms where she received the personal attention of the management. She had only to lift her finger and before it had had time to press the bell at the side of her bed, in her private lounge by the fireplace or over the bath in the adjoining bathroom, everyone, from the chef downwards, was queueing up at her door to obey her commands.

All this had been related to Cara, with a sarcastic smile, by the man called Mr. Smith. He had also given instructions—Mrs. Driver's instructions—as to where she should buy her uniform, charging her purchases to Mrs. Driver's account. Mr. Smith had handed over a list of items which, he informed Cara, were compulsory for all companion- helps of Mrs. Flora Driver. Refusal to wear any single item would, he warned, result in instant dismissal.

She was, he said, to wear her uniform at the start of her journey northwards, and from then on, whether on duty or off, those clothes must adorn her person. At this, Cara had nearly thrown the list back in the sardonic face of Mrs. Driver's representative. Only just in time did she control her temper, knowing that, had she not done so, the fact would have been dutifully conveyed straight back by Mr. Smith, no doubt via the telephone, to the ears of Mrs. Driver.

So, under the amused gaze of Mr. Smith, she swallowed her pride and nodded, folding the list and pushing it into her bag.

Now she stared at her reflection in the train window. It filled her with horror. How Steven could have borne to kiss her goodbye she could not imagine. The only thing she had been spared was the wearing of a regulation hat, but what her new employer had insisted on had, perhaps, been worse.

'That,' Mr. Smith had said, eyeing her fair hair, 'must, I'm afraid, be cut.'

Cara had paled and put her hand to the hair which curled softly about her neck. 'But, Mr. Smith, I don't *want* to have it cut. I like it like this. My--' Just in time, she stopped herself. Boy-friend, she nearly said.

'Your--?'

'My—my father, he says how—how well it suits me.'

Mr. Smith had looked down at the table, rubbed the tips of his fingers over the surface as if testing the quantity of polish that had been applied to it, and looked up again. 'How much do you want this job, Miss Hirst?'

'A great deal,' she had whispered.

'Then that hair must be cut.'

'Please, Mr. Smith,' she had pleaded, '*please ...*'

'Mrs. Driver insists, Miss Hirst.' His voice had been toneless. 'All her companion-helps must have short hair. I think she believes,' he looked down

again at the table, 'that long hair enhances a woman's beauty and short hair takes it away. Her companion-helps, she categorically states, *must* be unattractive. Otherwise, she argues, they up and off and find a mate and that, as they say,' a faint smile, 'is that. At least it is as far as she is concerned.'

'Mr. Smith?' she asked softly.

He did not answer, merely raising his eyebrows.

'If I—if I did this,' she put up both hands and tugged her hair back, 'would that do, do you think?'

He looked at her, wandered slowly round the table until he was facing her, put out a hand and took the bunch of hair from her tense fingers, viewing the result. Her eyes as she looked up at him were large and pleading. Their blueness, in her anguish, was intense. Her lips, moist with apprehension, parted slightly as if she were holding her breath.

He took his time making up his mind, studying her features one by one, as if, like a painter who worked from memory, he was endeavouring to remember every detail, every emotion which chased across them. Then he let the hair go. It fell to her shoulders again, framing her face, adding an appealing softness to it, a softness to which even the most flint-hearted male could hardly fail to be drawn.

'It will have to be cut, Miss Hirst.' If he saw the tremble of the lips, then he gave no sign.

He must, Cara decided bitterly, hating the man more every extra minute she spent in his company, be as hard and intractable as his employer.

Cara lunched on the train. It was an expensive meal, but although Cara had taken the cash to pay for it out of her own pocket, it was Mrs. Driver's money because Mr. Smith had given her sufficient, he said, to cover the cost of her train fare and any other incidental expenses she might incur on the way.

The strange thing was, she thought, just before she opened the covers of the book she had brought with her, how he had given her the money. He had felt

in the inside pocket of his immaculate jacket and drawn out his own cheque book and pen. He had bent down and started writing, straightened, looked at her thoughtfully, ripped out the partly-written cheque and, crushing it into a ball, tossed it away.

Again he had felt in a pocket, producing this time a wallet. He had counted out a number of high-value notes—far more, Cara had thought, than she would ever need to spend—thrown them across the table and told her to use those to pay her way up to the north country to take up the post to which he had so abruptly and so imperiously appointed her.

'That,' she had told him bluntly, 'will be far too much.' He had looked at her as if he could not believe his ears. He told her that if it would make her any happier, she could return the balance at some future date, quite forgetting that, as a member of an employment agency appointed to choose a companion-help for Mrs. Flora Driver, he would never see her again.

But, he had added, if she had any sense, and possessed the ability to spend money like water which all the women of his acquaintance seemed to have, she would use all of it on herself, every single penny. Where that came from, he had added carelessly, there was a great deal more. Which, Cara had thought, for a mere employee of a woman whose interests he was supposed to be looking after, was an odd thing indeed to say.

Steven had whistled when he had heard how much she had just collected from Mrs. Driver's representative. He had kissed her as they stood on the pavement, a hearty, congratulatory kiss that had had her looking round anxiously again, in case there had been someone watching.

At her journey's end, Cara indulged herself by taking a taxi from the station to the hotel at which Mrs. Driver resided. She paid the taxi man and gave him a large tip. She could afford to, having so much money left over from her journey she hardly knew what to do with it. As soon as circumstances allowed, she promised herself, she would ask Mrs. Driver for Mr. Smith's address and return the excess money to him. That, at least, she would have off her conscience. She refused to be under any obligation or entertain any kind of guilt feelings in relation to that autocratic, sarcastic individual.

The taxi driver had at first refused to accept the tip. He had added insult to injury by looking her up and down in quite a kindly fashion, noting the drab navy-blue coat, navy lace-up shoes, white blouse with its demure collar and thick, straight, navy skirt showing beneath the coat. Then he had said, 'Sure you haven't made a mistake, dear? I mean, it's a lot of money. I don't mind taking it from them as is filthy rich, but you, poor kid ..

She had flushed deeply and with as much dignity as she could muster from beneath the nauseating uniform which covered her unbelievably shapely outline, said, 'It's quite all right. The lady I'm working for has been very generous to me, so--'

'Oh, it's *her* that's paying, is it?' The man had grinned in a satisfied way. 'As I said, there's some as I don't mind taking from ..And he had driven away.

The hotel was not quite the splendid affair she had come to believe a woman as rich as Mrs. Driver would patronise. Outside was a yellow AA sign swinging in the breeze, and bearing three stars. Only three, Cara mused, as she bent down to pick up her cases. She had thought it would be at least a four-star affair. The sound of the sea breaking on the shore across the road was music to her tired ears, tired from the rattle and bump of a seemingly endless train journey. But after a cursory glance at the grey-blue waters of the North Sea, she had walked with a great deal of nervousness towards the hotel entrance.

Behind the desk in the entrance foyer, the receptionist was dauntingly efficient. She was young, red-haired and, even in uniform—pale blue dress with touches of white— looked attractive. Uniform, Cara thought, and shivered in spite of the thickness of the top-coat she was wearing, and the air-conditioned warmth of the atmosphere. The very word repelled her.

The receptionist appeared to have been expecting her. She smiled, putting Cara at her ease. Surely, Cara thought, she's not an ordinary employee? Her manner was so confident, so pert, but in a charming way, she must hold a superior position in the hierarchy of the hotel staff?

The woman picked up a phone, dialled and, with a half- smile on her face, spoke to the person at the other end. She turned away from Cara as if to hide

the first part of her conversation. There was a touch of intimacy in the tone before it became brisk and businesslike.

'Yes, she's here,' the receptionist said. 'A Miss Hirst, complete with cases, ready and waiting to be taken to Mrs. Driver.'

Cara was puzzled. If it was not Mrs. Driver to whom the woman was speaking, then who was it? The manager, perhaps? But she would hardly be informing the manager of the arrival of so insignificant a person as Cara Hirst.

'No, no,' the receptionist was saying, 'don't come down. The porter will see her upstairs. 'Bye for now.'

The receptionist smiled at Cara. Then she beckoned to the porter who, Cara thought, with her trained eye, must surely still be a schoolboy working to augment his pocket money. The receptionist hoped Cara would enjoy a long and comfortable stay. Was it her imagination, Cara wondered, or had there been a touch of irony in the woman's voice?

How many other companion-helps, Cara reflected, had climbed hopefully up these stairs only, a short time later, to walk down them again and out of the hotel for ever?

The boy took her along the first-floor corridor, right to the very end. He dropped the cases and waited. Cara fumbled in her purse and produced a coin the value of which was out of all proportion to the service he had just rendered. The boy, having none of the scruples of the taxi driver, grinned broadly, said, 'Thanks, pal,' and raced all the way back again.

I really must stop over-tipping with someone else's money, Cara told herself. Now he'll expect an enormous tip from me every time, and after this I simply won't be able to afford it.

But that, at that moment, was the least of her worries. For a few more seconds, there was a door between her and the future, between her and her employer, between her and success or failure. Failure for the second time in her life? No, this time she simply must succeed.

CHAPTER TWO

Mrs. Flora Driver inspected Cara Hirst at exactly the same time as Cara Hirst inspected her. And Cara's heart, which had not been especially high in her body, sank like the setting sun at what she saw.

Mrs. Driver was not exactly old, but she certainly could not be described as young. She was sharp-eyed, pale-faced, white-haired, having on her small frame almost more weight than her short legs could bear to carry. She was seated in a wheelchair. It was not of a modern design, as Cara would have expected of a woman of her financial standing. It was an old-fashioned affair, with small wheels, the kind of chair which required a willing person constantly at its back to propel it.

The woman's hands were heavily-veined, her short fingers bearing with some difficulty the weight of rings which adorned many of them. Her clothes told tales of decades gone by, of great mahogany wardrobes and moth-balls and rustling silks at lavish social gatherings. All in the past, of course, all gone with approaching age and encroaching disability.

For Cara could see at a glance that Mrs. Driver would need the support of strong arms to assist her to use those frail legs, those over-weighted limbs, even from one side • of the room to the other. That she was short-tempered Cara could see by her eyes; that she was impatient and exacting by the tight wrinkles round her thin lips. No, | Mrs. Flora Driver was not going to be an easy person to work for.

And what did Mrs. Driver think of her? 'Complexion,' Mrs. Driver was saying, 'free of make-up, as I ordered. Hair cut unbecomingly short. Make sure it stays that way. Face—hm—not plain enough. Shape of it too good, cheekbones too high, eyes too bright, lips too well-shaped. Take off your coat, girl. Yes, uniform detracts from your looks well enough to keep any man's eyes averted from you. You'll do. Your room adjoins my bedroom.'

Somewhere behind them a door creaked open and Cara, not daring to glance round under her new employer's scrutiny, concluded that it was the chambermaid coming through to turn back the bed-covers.

'There's a bell by my bed,' Mrs. Driver was saying, 'in case I should need you in the night. If I do, you must get up straight away, do you understand?'

Miserably, Cara nodded. So night and day she would be on call, awake, alert, even if she were woken from a deep sleep.

'Got any nursing experience?'

'No, Mrs. Driver. I'm sorry.'

'Pity. It would have been an asset.'

'You didn't—it wasn't in the advertisement.'

'I couldn't put in all my wants, girl. The list would have filled the newspaper. I pay my companion-helps well, and I like to get value for money. Still, it's not often I need medical attention, and when I do I certainly don't want it from an amateur. There's a telephone next to my bed, and there's a doctor on call whenever I want him. I pay him well, too. Now, take your coat and your cases. Unpack, wash and come back in here. We dine downstairs every evening. All my other meals, and yours too, are taken in this suite of rooms I rent.'

'Do I,' Cara ventured, 'change for dinner?'

If was as though she had placed her head in the mouth of a crocodile. The reprimand she received for her audacity nearly had her head off.

'*Dress* for dinner? *You?* Miss Hirst, whatever else you may have been in your short life, whatever social position you may have held before coming to work for me, here, in my employment, you are in a very subordinate position indeed. *Dress* for dinner? The impudence! Was it not made clear at your interview that at all times, whether on duty or off, you wear that uniform you are wearing now?'

Cara lifted her drooping head and nodded. 'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Driver. I'm afraid that for the moment I—I--' I thought I was back home with my

father loving me, and Steve by my side looking at me with admiration— and expectation. 'I forgot.'

'Please don't *forget* again.' She waved her hand vaguely and somewhat surprisingly, towards the door through which Cara had entered. 'Before you go to your room to unpack, meet my nephew. You have to some time. It might as well be now.'

So someone had come into the room when the door creaked. But it wasn't the chambermaid. It wasn't even female. It was a very male, very tall, very arrogant-looking man. Cara found herself looking into the amused, sarcastic, ice-cool eyes of Mrs. Flora Driver's 'representative'.

Cara swallowed, found some breath and whispered, 'Mr. Smith?'

'Mr. Smith be damned,' said Cara's new employer. 'He's the son of his mother, and her married name was Sutherland; So his name's Sutherland. Shaun Sutherland.'

'Sutherland?' Cara's voice was little more than a croak. 'Not—not *the* Shaun Sutherland?'

He bowed a deep, slow, mocking bow.

'Yes, yes, of course,' snapped his aunt. 'Playwright, short story writer, but most of all, novelist.'

'I've—I've read your books,' Cara whispered. 'I—I think they're wonderful.'

He bowed again.

'They all say that,' said his aunt. 'Especially the women. It's his good looks they're after, not to mention his money.'

'But,' Cara turned large, honest eyes first to the aunt, then to the nephew, 'it happens to be true. I—I think you're the best, the finest novelist this century.'

'You're just one of millions,' said Mrs. Driver.

The nephew said nothing.

'Now, stop this babbling and do as I say, Miss Hirst. Go to your room, unpack your cases—though what you have in them I can't imagine—and return to me and await the dinner gong.'

Cara, throwing her coat over her shoulder, bent down to lift her suitcases. The nephew made an almost imperceptible move to help her, changed his mind and, like his aunt, just watched. Cara walked slowly to the communicating door between sitting-room and bedroom, knowing that leading out of Mrs. Driver's room was her own.

At the door she turned. 'Mr. Smith—I—I mean, Mr. Sutherland.'

His eyebrows rose inquiringly.

'That interview you gave me—I'm sorry for anything I said to you. I'm sorry if I was r--'

The firm shake of his head stopped her just in time.

Mrs. Driver looked from one to the other. 'What does the girl mean—she's sorry? For what is she sorry? What did she say that she feels she's got to apologise?'

'Aunt, dear aunt,' the placating tone succeeded in soothing, and it seemed that only Cara heard the ironic note, 'still your fears. It was, shall we say, more of an encounter than an interview, an encounter I enjoyed more than words can tell.' His brown eyes found Cara's anxious blue ones. 'Do as my aunt says, Miss Hirst. Unpack your cases, prepare yourself mentally and--' the cool eyes dropped to roam over her, pausing reminiscently where the loose blouse now hung in place of the clinging ribbed sweater, 'physically for the work that awaits your attention.'

He was dismissing her. Two spots of indignant colour appeared in her cheeks. Unreasonably annoyed that he should have seen fit to send her from the room, and annoyed with herself, too, that she should have lingered long

enough almost to ask for that dismissal, she turned away and walked briskly towards her bedroom.

It was a room that spoke of comfort rather than luxury. There was a divan bed, rugs to cover worn patches on the carpet and the usual bedroom furniture. Inside the wardrobe door was a full-length mirror. Cara turned from it, sick at heart. Was this the appearance she was going to have to show to the world for—how long?—the next few months or even, if she could stand the strain of looking after Mrs. Flora Driver, the next year or two?

No wonder Mrs. Driver's nephew looked at her with such derisive amusement, as if he were enjoying her plight. Thinking of him reminded her that she owed him the balance of the money he had given her. She brushed her shortened hair until it cracked and sparkled, curling of its own accord and forming a soft, fair frame to her face. Then she tipped the contents of her purse on to the bed and counted the coins and notes, separating the money she knew to be hers from the money which was given to her by the mythical 'Mr. Smith', and pushed the balance into a drawer.

After a last despairing look at her pale, unmade-up face, the shapeless blouse and classic navy cardigan which she had pulled over it, she crossed the room to place her hand on the handle of the communicating door. With a quick intake of breath to give her courage, she tapped on the door. There was no reply which, Cara assumed, meant that the room was empty. She opened the door and crossed to the door which led into her employer's lounge.

At once Mrs. Driver was on to her. 'Did I give you permission to enter my bedroom whenever you felt so inclined?'

The nephew was there in a fireside chair, legs outstretched and crossed, magazine held up. Momentarily he lowered it, examined the newcomer in swift but minute detail, starting with her head and finishing at her feet, and raised the magazine again indifferently.

'I'm—I'm sorry, Mrs Driver, i thought—I didn't think--'

'I cannot tolerate females who don't think. Companion- helps who don't think don't stay in my employ for long.'

Cara made herself look suitably crushed.

'Next time,' her employer continued, 'unless I personally allow you to do so, don't use my room as a passageway. In future, use the door from your bedroom into the corridor, walk along to the door to this lounge and ask permission to enter in the usual way.'

'Yes, Mrs. Driver.'

The dinner gong sounded.

'Wheel me to the lift, Miss Hirst.'

It was the first of the many duties she would be performing for her new employer. At least, she consoled herself, it was simple enough to push a chair from one place to another.

What Cara had not reckoned with was Mrs. Driver's weight. With her hands on the handles she pushed—and nothing happened. The nephew who, by now, was standing, made an infinitesimal movement towards the chair, checked himself and put his hands into his pockets.

This time Cara braced herself and with her hands clamped tightly around the rubber-covered handles, and using all the energy at her command, managed to get the wheels turning. Since Mrs. Driver was sitting with her back to the door, it was necessary to swing the chair into the opposite direction. Cara gritted her teeth, and by exerting all the muscle power her body possessed, pushed, pulled and even slid the chair until it faced the door.

At once Mrs. Driver stopped her. 'You have jarred me,' she complained, 'from top to toe. I simply cannot stand it. My arthritis cannot stand it. You will have to cope much better than this, Miss Hirst. You're young and strong— strength always goes with youth--'

'A fallacy, Aunt,' said her nephew. 'Strength comes with practice, not youth.'

'Keep your truisms, your platitudes, for your books, my dear nephew. Push me, Miss Hirst.'

So Cara pushed, steeling herself to propel her burden along the corridor to the lift. Shaun Sutherland walked a pace or two behind and as they reached the lift, he pressed the bell. Not a word was spoken and only the whine of the approaching lift filled the silence. Having relaxed her muscles, Cara found it necessary to brace them again in order to manoeuvre the chair and its occupant into the lift. Shaun followed, pressed the button and waited, hands in pockets, for the lift to descend.

A feeling was building up in Cara of resentment against the tall, lean, dark-haired man beside her. Why, seeing her struggles, did he make no attempt to help her? Not a hand did he put out, not a finger did he raise to assist her to move his aunt from one place to another.

The lift arrived at the ground floor. In the few seconds in which it took Cara to gather her strength, Mrs. Driver grew impatient. 'What are you waiting for, Miss Hirst? My nephew to do your work for you?'

The words were such an uncanny interception of Cara's thoughts that she coloured deeply. Mrs. Driver, whose back was towards her, did not see it. The nephew did, and his smile, which did not spring from sympathy, told Cara that with his novelist's insight he had guessed exactly what she had been thinking. His hand came out, inviting Cara to remove her burden from the lift.

She glared at him and his ability to read her very thoughts brought such an angry brightness to her sky-blue eyes that his eyebrows lifted. His eyes were expressive, too. He had no need to speak. He had succeeded in putting her into her place without uttering a single word. She coloured again and was furious with herself for giving herself away. Brilliant writer he might be, but he was also arrogant, conceited and infuriating.

The lift, empty once more, whined away to another floor. Cara looked about her for the dining-room. A hand came down on one of hers, a strong, long-fingered, sensitive kind of hand. She gazed at it, feeling, as it covered hers, as though an electric shock was travelling at lightning speed along the nerves of her arm.

The owner of that hand was gesturing towards two swing doors, over which were the words, clear and illuminated, 'dining-room'. Cara felt affronted, as though Shaun Sutherland was, in his quiet, supercilious way, pointing out how stupid she was.

'I'm sorry,' she said, and the hand over hers was removed.

Other guests gazed at them as they made their way towards the swing doors. There were looks of sympathy and recognition for Mrs. Driver, admiration and respect for Shaun Sutherland and passing, slightly contemptuous pity for Mrs. Driver's attendant.

Cara, pausing for a moment, took in the crisp whiteness in the dining-room, the soft lights, the expensive expertise of the fleet-footed waiters. In the rooms on the upper floors, unpretentious comfort was the rule. Here, no expense had been spared. There were low-hanging chandeliers, trolleys laden with enticing sweets, wine bottles bucketed in ice and chrome. Candles flickered in silver-plated holders and each table had its own individual flower arrangement.

Involuntarily, Cara sighed. For a few seconds she dreamed—that she was a guest at one of those tables, with any item on the expensive menu hers for the asking. Her companion was a distinguished-looking man, tall, dark-haired, brown-eyed, worldly, perceptive, attentive to her smallest wish, bearing a remarkable resemblance to ... She looked up to find him looking down at her. Had he guessed her thoughts again? But he was wrong, wrong! It was Steven of whom she was thinking, Steven, the anchor in her strange, new world.

'This way, Miss Hirst.' He sounded irritable as though she was too slow now even for him. He indicated a table for three near the window and led the way across the room, nodding briefly to bowing waiters.

'Tonight my nephew eats with us,' Mrs. Driver said. 'Usually he dines alone, either in his room or over there at his own table.'

So the nephew resided at the hotel, too!

'You will have to help me from my chair to the table, Miss Hirst.' Mrs. Driver's voice reminded Cara of the reason for her presence at the hotel. Not as a guest but as a slave, servant, companion-help to Mrs. Flora Driver.

Moving Mrs. Driver was, Cara reflected, like lifting a car and carrying it from one side of the road to the other. Shaun Sutherland stood by and watched. Quite irrationally, Cara resented his detachment. Why did he just stand by without offering to help? He was strong—you had only to look at the length and breadth of him to see that—he was muscular, there was power in those broad shoulders and strength in those arms.

Yet he was unfeeling enough to watch her struggling to help his overweight, semi-disabled aunt from one seat to another without lifting a finger to come to her aid. But at last, partly with the help of her stick, Mrs. Driver was seated, companion-help on her left, nephew on her right. Thus Cara found herself with Shaun Sutherland opposite her, the flickering candles between them now lighting, now shadowing his features, so that his expression played hide and seek and tantalised her into wondering what he was thinking.

For the first time since her arrival, Cara found herself relaxing. Matters were subtly, skilfully taken out of her hands. The menu was handed to her, she was asked by Shaun to name her choice of dish.

'You mustn't take all this for granted, Miss Hirst,' Mrs. Driver said sharply. 'I have a fixed menu which is served to me each day. This evening is an exception. For some reason, my nephew has taken it into his head to treat us to a meal. We are dining at his expense.'

Shaun Sutherland smiled. 'Imagine, Miss Hirst, your name is Cinderella. Imagine you have a fairy godmother who has waved a wand and dressed you in silks and flowing skirts, transformed you from rags to riches. You have imagination?'

'Very little, Mr. Sutherland.' Slowly she turned her empty glass by its stem. 'I'm not a writer, like you. You could probably breathe life and meaning into an inanimate object like this glass. But to me, it's just a receptacle to drink from.'

'Yes,' he leaned back, eyes narrow, looking her over, 'I could even breathe life and animation—and beauty—into someone as plainly and unattractively dressed as you.'

Plain? Unattractive? Was that what he thought of her? Her bottom lip curled of its own accord, her teeth made indentations in it. Did it matter what he thought of her? Her social circles were not his, her way of life—a bedsitter on the outskirts of London which she had rented near the school at which she had taught—was as different from that of a famous, celebrated novelist as a rowing-boat from an ocean-going liner.

'Use the little imagination you lay claim to,' he was saying, 'and think yourself into a situation where you're occupying a table for two with your boy-friend sitting opposite you--'

'Boy-friend? *Boy-friend?*' Mrs. Driver made the expression sound tainted. 'One of my stipulations was that the successful applicant must have no young man, no thoughts of marriage in mind. That is why your predecessor was dismissed, Miss Hirst. I discovered she had a fiance whom she was eventually planning to marry. You, I hope, have no such man amongst your acquaintances?'

'Fiance, Mrs. Driver?' Why was her voice so faint, so quavering?

'Boy-friend, Miss Hirst.' Shaun Sutherland held her eyes. 'If you won't answer my aunt's question, answer mine. Have you a boy-friend?'

Was she imagining it—perhaps she had more imagination than she admitted to—or was there a touch of sharpness in his voice? It was almost as if he were testing her, challenging her to tell the truth. But, although lying was obnoxious to her, this was one occasion on which she would have to lie. If she said, I have a boy-friend, she would be out of those swing doors and, with her packed cases in her hands, making her way to the railway station and taking the next train south, out of a job and with scarcely a penny to her name.

'Boy-friend?' Her eyes sought the dazzling whiteness of the starched tablecloth.

'Look at me, Miss Hirst.'

Her eyes lifted to his, but she could not tell a lie while looking into those perceptive, inscrutable eyes. She looked down again, shaking her head as she did so. She could not, even now, even to save her job, bring herself to say the words out loud, 'No, I have no boy-friend,' when they simply were not true.

The lie enacted, she dared again to look at him. Why was he looking at her so curiously? Did he *know* about Steven? Had she, at the interview, somehow given herself away? She held her breath. Would he press the subject?

The waiter came, standing patiently while their respective minds were made up. In the end, Cara left it to her host to make the final decision as to what she would have to eat. Then Cara asked, with a touch of timidity, 'Do you live here, too, Mr. Sutherland?'

He nodded, but did not elaborate, leaving it to his aunt to explain.

'Like me, he finds it more convenient. Like me, he has a permanent suite of rooms at his disposal. If he goes abroad for any length of time, they remain empty until he returns.'

No home atmosphere, no intimate contacts, no one to whom he could talk, discuss his ideas, report his progress to loving, interested ears? Her expression must have caught his eye, because he smiled.

'There's no need to feel sorry for me, Miss Hirst. I choose my own way of living. I have meals on time, served wherever I choose. My rooms are kept tidy and clean. There's privacy when I need it and peace and quiet for my work.'

'Isn't it—well, a bit expensive, Mr. Sutherland?' Cara wondered at her own audacity in asking him.

'Expensive, child?' Mrs. Driver was aghast. 'You ask my nephew that? A successful writer, renowned and respected throughout the world?'

His aunt's words seemed sincerely to amuse him. 'In addition to my earnings, Miss Hirst, I have private means. She was not to know that, Aunt.'

'Now she'll set her cap at you, boy. Once a man tells a woman his financial background, especially one as secure as yours, she doesn't rest until she has her claws in him, puts a collar round his neck and leads him to the altar.'

He threw back his head and laughed. 'Many have tried, Aunt, but see--' he spread his hands, innocent of rings.

'I'm in my mid-thirties, remember.' He leaned across and patted his aunt's gnarled and bent hand. 'I'm too wily now for any woman to catch me. I may allow her to *think* she has--'

'I know, dear boy, I know. I'm not so old nor so short-sighted as to miss what has gone on in your life under my very nose. Many's the affair of the heart you've had and many's the disappointed woman who's knelt begging you at your feet to make an honest woman of her.'

Shaun Sutherland laughed again. 'Melodramatic, Aunt! And the expression "honest woman" is a little behind the times.'

'It was the language of my day and age, and all that concerns me is that it suffices to act as a warning.' A quick glance at her companion-help was plainly intended to let her know at whom the warning was directed.

Shaun ordered wine and as the meal progressed, Cara began to forget the subservient, humble role she was there to play. Unwittingly, and under the influence of the wine, her cheeks grew flushed and she allowed her true personality to surface. She did not realise that Shaun was deliberately drawing her out and making her laugh.

Even Mrs. Driver seemed temporarily to thaw under the influence of the wine which she was not in the habit of imbibing. Glances came their way from other guests. The men, particularly, looked at Cara, whose animation highlighted, like a floodlit building of architectural artistry, the natural attraction of her features. The drab clothes she wore faded into meaninglessness under the impact of her good looks.

It was when Mrs. Driver's eyes caught the glance being directed at her companion-help by a particularly admiring male guest that her good humour evaporated as if it had never been.

'Your hair, Miss Hirst. What have you done to it?'

Brought cruelly down to earth like blossom in a gale, Cara stammered, 'B-but I had it cut, Mrs. Driver. It was long, down to my shoulders. Your nephew forced me to have it shortened--'

'Under my aunt's instructions, Miss Hirst,' he said softly, his eyes holding a touch of frost at her twisting of the truth, 'under my aunt's instructions.'

'And you know very well, Shaun, why I gave those instructions. Cut or not, I don't approve. It's too—too--'

'Becoming?' Her nephew hazarded the word, a smile on his face.

'But I only brushed it, Mrs. Driver. If it's curled, it has done so of its own accord. I didn't deliberately--'

The first course arrived and, to Cara's relief, her employer's thoughts were directed to the food which was being placed before them. 'Much too sumptuous, Shaun. You're being far too extravagant. I can't think why you've asked us to dine with you. You usually sit across the room with your back to me, and to everyone else, shutting yourself into a world of your own.'

He smiled and invited her to enjoy whatever was put in front of her. 'Make the most of it, Aunt. It may never happen again. For once I decided to desert my solitariness and maybe, who knows, in Miss Hirst's eyes to give myself an aura of sociability, even if it is only an illusion.'

'Yes,' said his aunt, tackling her meal with a relish which belied her affected reluctance to accept what she was being offered, 'you're not a lover of your fellow-creatures, are you, Shaun? In your books you tear them apart.'

'Gently, I hope, Aunt, always gently?' The glint in his eyes was born of sarcasm.

'Savagely, my dear boy, savagely. You're merciless with those of whom you disapprove or who displease you.'

'Only in my books, Aunt, surely?' The sarcasm was in his voice now, as well as his eyes.

'In everyday life, too. I haven't known you since birth for nothing. I haven't seen you grow up, grow critical, grow hard, without learning to know you inside out.'

'You claim too much,' was the reply. 'You know what I'm prepared to show you, nothing else. There are other sides to me about which you know nothing and never will.'

'I should hope not,' Mrs. Driver said, with a rare attempt at humour. 'Your private life, which you keep under lock and key, your love affairs--'

'You approve of the food, Miss Hirst?' Shaun Sutherland cut in smoothly. It was, Cara knew, not an accidental interruption of his aunt's train of thought.

Cara replied, with genuine sincerity, 'It's delicious, Mr. Sutherland.'

'You're not used to such—as my aunt insists on calling it—sumptuous fare?'

She shook her head. 'When we—my—I--' She had become hopelessly entangled with her own web of lies.

' "We", Miss Hirst?' The glint in his eyes had turned diamond hard.

Mrs. Driver, oblivious of the undercurrent of suspicion, the silent interrogation, her nephew's inexplicable mistrust of the new companion-help, continued with her dedicated attention to her meal.

'No, Mr. Sutherland, I'm not used to it.' Cara sidestepped the implied question. 'On my salary as a teacher, after I had paid the rent for my

bed-sitter, for the clothes I needed and the food I ate, there wasn't much left. If I—I—did eat out, it was at a humble cafe in the high street.'

'Putting aside any surplus you may have had as savings, perhaps?'

What was the man getting at? If he was aware of Steven's existence, how had he found out? Was his mind so keen, so probing, so quick to come to conclusions that even his inspired guesses led him inevitably to the truth?

'Naturally, I saved as much as it was possible for me to save. I still am saving. It's only common sense, surely, that when a woman reaches the age of nearly twenty-four, and is still unmarried, she must think of her future.'

Mrs. Driver, who seemed to have surfaced from her preoccupation with her meal, nodded in satisfied agreement. 'At twenty-four, a girl can almost be considered as having passed the age of finding a marriage partner.'

Her nephew gave a short, unbelieving laugh. 'This isn't the nineteenth century, Aunt. Twenty-four, these days, is nothing. I've known women in their fifties marry for the first time.'

'But,' sharply, 'Miss Hirst has no intention of marrying anyone. It was one of the conditions of her employment. I *will not* be subjected to a constant change of companion- help. If a young woman comes to work for me, it can almost be considered a pensionable occupation. When I pass away—as we all have to do eventually—Miss Hirst, provided she gives good and long service and sees me through to the end of my days, will be well—exceptionally well—rewarded.'

With a nod to Cara, she went on, 'Bear that in mind, Miss Hirst. One day you will be a very rich woman. I have no one else to whom to leave my wealth. My nephew is so well-to-do himself he does not require it. You shall get it. Miss Hirst, one day in the—I hope and pray—distant future, you will inherit from me more—far more than you ever dreamed of possessing. Believe me, it will be better than a husband, it will bring you more' happiness, more satisfaction and more worldly goods than any man could eve? give you.'

There was a long, painful silence. Cara swallowed some wine and played with her glass. She was moved by Mrs. Driver's words—and terrified by them. They made her squirm with embarrassment and guilt. She was there under false pretences. She was there to earn sufficient, with Steven's earnings, to buy themselves a place of their own.

She had no intention whatsoever of putting up for any longer than necessary with the kind of treatment which Mrs. Flora Driver meted out to her unfortunate companion- helps. Nor had she any intention of spending the rest of her life in that terrible thing Mrs. Driver called a 'uniform', hiding her natural shape for ever, until she was too old to care.

'Well, Miss Hirst?' The nudging, baiting voice of Mrs. Driver's nephew broke into her anguished musing.

Cara shook her head. Tears welled into her eyes and, horrified, she wiped them away with the back of her hand. She had become so involved with her own intrigue, so enmeshed and caught up with a situation which had been created entirely by herself, she could see no way out.

To her amazement, and even greater confusion, Mrs. Driver stretched out a beringed hand and patted hers. 'She's overcome with gratitude, poor girl. I shouldn't have told her so abruptly, so hastily. But it proves one thing to me, to my heartfelt satisfaction. She is basically good, completely artless and utterly trustworthy. Shaun, my dear nephew, I congratulate you on your choice of companion-help for me, and thank you from the bottom of my heart.'

CHAPTER THREE

In Mrs. Driver's room was a television set. It was her invariable practice after dinner, she told Cara, to watch a play or a film. Rarely an evening went by, she said, when there was not one or the other on one of the channels. So Mrs. Driver, settled comfortably in front of the television set, her stick with its special arm and hand rest within reach, and the bell within a finger's touch, dismissed Cara for the next two hours.

'The play,' she said, 'will be followed by the news. When that is over, I shall retire to bed. Then, of course, I shall need your assistance. Until I summon you, you are free. You will, if you please, be in your room on time. When I press this bell—it goes through to your bedroom—will you please come in immediately.'

Cara, leaving her, went through Mrs. Driver's bedroom into her own. Her reflection made her close her eyes. In her suitcase she had brought denim pants, sweaters, tee-shirts, even make-up. She must have been crazy to do so. Their hidden presence tantalised her. Flicking a comb through her hair, her disobediently curling hair, she rushed from the room as if the suitcases had grown legs and were chasing her, pleading with her to open them.

Avoiding the residents' television lounge—she was not in the mood to lose herself in plays and films, in other people's imaginings—she bypassed the bar and made for the other lounge. Here there were magazines set out on tables, shelves of books and racks of newspapers.

As she entered, people glanced at her idly, the men's preoccupied eyes turning away pityingly, the women's disparagingly. Cara knew she would have to harden herself to their glances. The days when admiration had pursed young men's lips into a soundless whistle and caused Steve's hand to stroke her long blonde hair, lifting strands of it to his mouth, had gone without trace.

She retreated into a corner, an armful of magazines acting as a barrier to the critical eyes around her. To occupy her mind, she began to work out just how long she would have to stay in Mrs. Driver's employ before she

managed to save enough, with Steve's income, to buy a house for them both to live in after their marriage.

Then, afraid that even the contents of her mind might be picked up by some freak thought-wave and conveyed to Mrs. Driver now blandly and contentedly watching television, she diverted her thoughts—the sums were too difficult to work out, anyway—and made an effort to assimilate the contents of the printed pages in front of her.

But again her thoughts wandered. Where, she wondered, was Mrs. Driver's nephew? Dedicatedly working in his room, writing his books, creating his masterpieces?

The mere idea of him made her restless. She put aside the magazines and gazed into the darkness outside. When the night had passed, would daylight bring consolation? In the light of day, would life seem a little more bearable? All around her, people were reading, some glancing at her quickly, as if annoyed by the diversion her restless movements were creating.

Picking up her handbag, she wandered into the entrance hall. What time, she wondered, was breakfast? When was lunch? There were no noticeboards on which the information was printed. Round the corner was the reception desk. There must be someone there who could tell her. Yes, she could hear voices, which meant that there was someone on duty. Whoever it was was talking and laughing with a guest.

With a tall, lean, dark-haired guest, who leant on his elbow, a glass in his hand, his eyes still warm from the joke that had passed between himself and the red-haired receptionist. She remembered the touch of familiarity in the woman's voice as she had spoken on the phone to the man whom she now knew to be Mrs. Driver's nephew. And at that moment, that same nephew was leaning, with equal familiarity, towards the slim, attractive woman on the other side of the counter.

At the sight of them, Cara's breathing quickened, and a pain somewhere in the centre of her being began to make its presence felt. Womanising. That was the word that swooped, like a swallow in flight, in and out of her mind.

He was good at it, wasn't he? Hadn't his aunt hinted at it, most unsubtly, at dinner?

His affairs, his loves—was this woman, this attractive woman one of them? His latest, perhaps? So conveniently on the premises, her accent, her manner, her superior air putting her in a class above the usual type of person who was employed in such a post?

His head turned, his eyes, lazily scrutinising, came to rest on Cara's defiant face. She would not be put off by Shaun Sutherland's indolent, slightly insulting smile. She would get her information and nothing would stop her.

But her voice, when she asked the question, was uncertain and maddeningly timid. 'What time is breakfast, please?' she asked the woman.

'Eight o'clock to nine-thirty,' Shaun answered, saving his lady acquaintance the trouble.

Cara ignored him. 'And lunch?'

'Twelve-thirty to two,' Shaun replied.

Cara, colouring, began to walk away, but a hand, a long-fingered, surprisingly forceful hand, came out and gripped her wrist, pulling her back and bringing her round to face him. 'But it's information you'll hardly need to know, Miss Hirst. My aunt is a little eccentric in her habits. She rises at six-thirty, breakfasts at seven-fifteen, lunches at twelve o'clock precisely. She eats in her room, except for dinner in the evening. Afternoon tea she takes at four on the dot. Now, is there anything else you would like to know?'

Cara detached her hand—no easy feat as his fingers were tightly round her wrist—and with her head high, she replied, 'Yes. What time must I go to bed, Mr. Sutherland?'

There was an infinitesimal pause, then he broke into loud laughter. It followed her half-way up the stairs until he called out, 'That spirit of yours again, Miss Hirst! If you don't watch out, one day it will get you into a load of trouble. And don't say I didn't warn you!'

Cara came down a few steps. She was barely aware of the interested gaze of Shaun Sutherland's receptionist friend. 'You knew about it before you appointed me to the post, Mr. Sutherland. So why did you give me the job?'

He came to the foot of the stairs. His expression had changed. Her challenge had hardened his eyes, wrecked his mood. 'Because you were unemployed, and because for some extraordinary reason you aroused my compassion—and my pity. I was *sorry* for you, Miss Hirst.'

'Your aunt was right, Mr. Sutherland,' Cara said, between her teeth. 'You're savage in your treatment of people, not only in your books, but in real life. By your orders, your instructions, you reduce me to this,' she pulled at her thick navy skirt, 'and this,' she tugged at her shorn hair, 'then you laugh at me ...'

She ran the rest of the way down the stairs and out of the front entrance. She looked up and down the road. She was sobbing, she didn't care which way she went. Across the*road was the shore with its sand dunes and the sea. There was a gap in the traffic and she dashed across, feeling her feet tread from the hardness of the pavement to the sinking softness of the sand. Riding high above the clouds there was a crescent moon. In its intermittent light she found the edge of the sea and stood with her feet on the dampness the ebbing tide had left behind.

She had committed the unforgivable sin. In front of an employee at the hotel, she had abused a guest. And not just an ordinary guest; a distinguished resident of world-wide renown. Worse, she had, quite unjustly, accused the nephew of her employer—the man who had given her the job—of something for which he had no responsibility at all. In giving her those orders, he had only been carrying out his aunt's instructions.

It was cold. Her blouse was thin and inadequate to keep out the chill of a late March night. This was the north-east of England. Here, at her feet, the North Sea, sometimes calm, sometimes ferocious, drew back and pounced forward, retreated and advanced, under the uncertain light of the moon.

She folded her arms and drew in her shoulders. The tears were intermittent now. The sobs had almost stopped. It had been building up inside her all day,

this feeling, ever since, in fact, she had got the job. She did not know how long she could stand this sense of degradation, of subordination, of the insult of her intelligence which looking after a semi-helpless, impossibly demanding rich, elderly widow involved. But the thing that hurt most of all was the incarceration of her femininity, her soft, attractive womanliness behind this terrible facade of hideous, unsightly clothes.

There was a movement behind her and a jacket was dropped into place, round her shoulders. She wheeled round, raised her eyes and saw, standing, hands in pockets, a short distance away, the tall, sharp outline of the man at whom she had, only a few minutes before, hurled abuse. He was in his shirt-sleeves and the lithe, lean, shadowed shape of him aroused in her sensations which Steven, fond of him though she was, had never produced.

'It doesn't matter,' she said on a sob that took her by surprise. She pulled at the jacket, attempting to get it off her back. He was wearing nothing over his shirt. 'You'll be cold--'

'I'm acclimatised.'

'Thank you,' she whispered over the breaking of the waves.

There was a long, wordless pause. Cara took a breath, steadying her voice. 'I'm sorry, Mr. Sutherland. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. If you want me to resign--'

'You're my aunt's employee, not mine.' The curttness had not left his voice.

They stood for some moments looking out over the blackness of the sea. Now and then, and at regular intervals, there came a long, sweeping flash from out of the darkness.

'What—what is that, Mr. Sutherland?'

'Out there, in the morning if there's no mist, you'll see a group of off-shore islands. The flashes are from the lighthouse which stands on the northernmost tip of one of them.' She felt him glance at her. 'Has the crying stopped, Miss Hirst?' No sympathy, just a matter-of-fact question.

'Yes, Mr. Sutherland.'

'Then return to your room, will you? Any moment my aunt will be requiring your services. The television play she's been watching will be over by the time you've freshened your face and hidden all traces of your tears.'

'Thank you, Mr. Sutherland, for your jacket.'

He took it without a word, and put it on.

As she made her way up the shore between the sand dunes, he called, 'The road is busy. Don't dash across it this time. It's a little early to be feeling suicidal about this job you've taken on. That comes later.'

His sarcastic words reached her ears, then blew away, out over the sea. As she reached the road, she glanced back. He was staring over the dark waters, his long, lean frame briefly illuminated by a sweeping flash from the lighthouse on the islands.

It took Cara some time that night to fall asleep. Her room overlooked the road and on the other side was the sea.

It had not been easy getting Mrs. Driver to bed. Her arthritis affected her to such an extent that she had to be helped everywhere and with everything. Getting her into bed had been a physical strain. In addition, her hair had to be combed and pinned in a certain way, the electric blanket turned on to heat the bed for a specified length of time. She took tablets, too, which had to be counted out carefully and drunk with a measured amount of water. The walking stick had to be placed in an exact position beside the bed.

Before her employer had consented to settle down, she had insisted on being read to, a certain number of pages from one of Dickens' novels. The words had to be read neither too fast, nor too slow, not too loudly, nor too quietly.

Cara turned restlessly from side to side. The whole performance had taxed her patience almost beyond endurance. Towards the end of the evening, she had grown afraid she would lose her temper with the woman. If she had, she would by now be on her way back to London, suitcases in hand. Would it,

she thought almost feverishly, be so bad if she were? Would it matter so very much if she lost this exacting job, despite the high pay it carried?

Surely there must be work somewhere that she could tackle with greater ease, which did not tire her to such an extent that, as she had closed her own door behind her, she had almost cried out at the muscular strain which racked her limbs? And what if Mrs. Driver wanted her in the night?

But Mrs. Driver did not stir the whole night long. Cara awoke next morning to find grey skies, as grey as her mood and, across the turbulent sea, no sign at all of those offshore islands. A sea fog had come down, hiding them behind its Chill veil.

At six-thirty precisely, Mrs. Driver awoke. It was almost j as if an alarm clock had been set, but the only clock was inside Mrs. Driver's head. Everything, apart from the bath which Cara had helped her with the night before, had of necessity to be done again, but in reverse. Every item of clothing had to be put on, each stocking, made from a i strong stretch fabric, pulled up and fastened in a particular j way, each shoe lace tied in a neat double bow.

It's a nurse she needs, Cara thought, not a companion- help. Not a teacher of history—a *failed* teacher of history. And from the way Mrs. Driver scolded and tutted, complained and harassed, Cara guessed it would not be long before she became a *failed* companion-help. Mrs. Driver insisted that Cara breakfasted with her, although Cara protested that she did not feel she could eat a bite.

'You need your strength, every bit of it, to assist me,' Mrs. Driver had insisted, 'and it is only from your intake of food that you'll get it.'

So, reluctantly, Cara joined Mrs. Driver at the table by the window which overlooked the hotel gardens.

The clouds cleared sufficiently for Mrs. Driver to take her usual morning outing along the sea front. With arms which, even at this early hour, were beginning to protest at the strain being put upon them, Cara manipulated the chair into the corridor. As she did so, the door opposite her own bedroom

opened and Shaun Sutherland emerged. So that was where he lived, worked and slept—in a suite of rooms opposite hers.

She could not suppress a strange flash of pleasure at the sight of him. His hair was damp and shining from a shower he must have taken. His shirt was roll-necked and white, setting off well the grey of his belted jacket and slim-fitting trousers. His height was commanding, his bearing controlled and confident. He spoke and Cara came to her senses, tearing her eyes away.

He seemed not to have noticed her scrutiny, saying a pleasant 'good-morning' to his aunt and nodding to Cara. She had caught the watchful expression in his eyes, however, and wondered if he was examining her for a trace of last night's tears. How she regretted having given in to those moments of weakness, her outburst in his presence and her rush to seek solace on the sea shore.

'Come along, girl,' Mrs. Driver snapped. 'Why are you staring at my nephew? Don't go falling for him. It won't do you any good at all. He may be tall, dark and handsome, but underneath he's steel and granite rolled into one!' She laughed. 'Anyway, it wouldn't be reciprocated. No man in his right mind would find attractive a girl dressed in the uniform I demand that my employees wear. So remember that, the next time you go soft-eyed looking at him.'

Her back was to the girl to whom she spoke and therefore she did not see the ominous trembling of the lip, only to be superseded by a look at the nephew so vicious he slammed the door as he came out instead of closing it quietly. He returned her look and it was so caustic, Cara felt her hands, which were resting on the rubber-covered handles of the wheelchair, shake with a strange apprehension. They were quarrelling with their eyes, a bitter, wordless quarrel, but try though she might, her mind could not fix on a reason.

'Don't shake me about so!' Mrs. Driver said. 'And hurry, the lift is there, waiting.'

Cara started to run, but a hand, its pressure formidable, held her back. 'You'll do yourself some damage, Miss Hirst, if you go too fast. My aunt's no lightweight. Aunt, you should buy yourself a new chair.'

As they reached the lift, the doors began to close, but Shaun pressed the button and held it back. Cara pushed the chair into the lift, Shaun joined them and the lift moved down.

'That I will not do, and you know it,' Mrs. Driver responded. 'I refuse to part with this chair. I couldn't get used to a new-fangled one, with its complicated controls.'

'You'll be forced to one day, Aunt,' Shaun said quietly. 'You can't cling to the past for ever.' The doors slid open at the ground floor and with his head Shaun motioned Cara out, keeping his finger on the 'hold' button until she had manoeuvred the chair out of the lift.

'Stop mouthing platitudes and cliches, Shaun. You, of all people, a writer acclaimed by the world for your original turn of phrase, your literary brilliance!'

He smiled faintly and plainly was not amused.

'Go and have your breakfast,' his aunt directed as if he were a small boy. Pulling her scarf closer round her neck, she raised an imperious hand and motioned Cara towards the door.

Outside, in the early morning, a chill wind blew along the sea-front. To the right was the village, to the left the road stretched into the distance.

But in that distance something caught her eye. She had to look hard, to peer with concentration to make sure that what she was seeing was real and not put there by her mind, aided by her imagination and the mist. On a great piece of rock, towering over the sea and on a cliff edge was a large building with turrets and gables.

Was it her mind which magnified it into something magical, something greater than it really was, or was it the mist which clung to it like a

tantalising curtain? With reluctance she tore her eyes away, asking, 'Which way, Mrs. Driver?'

'The village, of course, girl. I have shopping to do.'

One day soon, Cara promised herself, she would walk in the opposite direction and look more closely at that mysterious building.

It was not easy pushing Mrs. Driver in and out of the village shops. Sometimes the shopkeepers or their assistants would come from behind the counter to help. At other times, in the supermarkets, Cara had to push the wheelchair between the rows of goods on display, while Mrs. Driver hugged the wire basket collecting the items which Cara had placed in it at her command.

On the way back, Cara walked more slowly, too slowly, it seemed, for Mrs. Driver, who urged her on. She had letters to write, she said, and if Miss Hirst didn't quicken her pace, their morning coffee would be cold. So, bracing her tired muscles, Cara pushed the chair a little harder and a little faster up the hill and turned thankfully into the gates of the hotel.

All the way back, she had watched fascinated as the building poised on the cliff-top grew larger and clearer as the mist dispersed. Was it a castle or was it a house? Was it occupied or was it a ruin? Shaun Sutherland would know, if she could ever find the courage to ask him.

But the day passed and Cara saw no more of Shaun, not even at dinner-time. The table across the room which, his aunt had told her, was permanently reserved for him, was empty.

'He's busy on his book,' Mrs. Driver said. 'Sometimes he doesn't come up for air for days. Not that he writes continuously. In between walking on the shore, I've seen him pace his rooms for half an hour, thinking, just thinking. If you interrupt his train of thought, he barks at you, Miss Hirst!' Mrs. Driver smiled one of her rare smiles. But it didn't last, as Cara had hoped it would. 'There are times when he neglects me,' she complained, 'even forgets he has an aunt on the premises.' She shook her head and continued with her meal.

After dinner, Mrs. Driver was installed once again in front of the television set. Cara, freed from her surveillance of the semi-invalid, sighed with relief. With a book in her hand, she ventured into the corridor. The door opposite hers stayed implacably shut. There was no sound coming from the other side of it, so she concluded, a little despondently, that Shaun must be out.

Avoiding the television lounge, Cara made for the other room. But there was a party of young people in there with a transistor radio switched to full power. She listened to the sound, heard their laughter, saw their happy faces and longed to be able to join them.

One of them looked up, noticed her, whispered to a friend and the whole group turned to look at her. The pity and amusement on their faces had her turning away and making for the door. Her teeth kept her lip—that errant, tell-tale lip—under control. That her own generation should laugh at her and find her an object of pity!

She wandered along the entrance hall and wondered what to do. An orange glow attracted her. Shaded lights around the walls of one of the more select bars, the high-backed seats, the subdued conviviality, proved irresistible. If she crept in unnoticed in the half-light, she would not need to order a drink. Across the room was an unoccupied alcove with a light above it. Keeping her eyes riveted on it, shutting out any curious glances, she made for the secluded corner and reached its sanctuary without hindrance and with relief.

Still without looking up, she opened her book, found her place and tried, with some success, to lose herself within its pages. After a few minutes, however, something tugged at her brain. Someone, somewhere, was concentrating on her. Instinct drew her eyes to the bar across the room.

Against it, elbow on counter, stood Shaun Sutherland. His eyes, deep in thought, dwelt on Cara. One foot was resting on the bar rail, one hand in his trouser pocket. He wore no jacket. His shirt was blue-patterned, his tie a deep blue to match. He did not seem to have given his order because the girl behind the bar looked at him questioningly from time to time.

As he roused himself from what appeared, to Cara's embarrassed eyes, a deep reverie, she returned to her book, hoping in the one action to achieve

two objectives—to shut him out of her thoughts and to hint to him that she wanted to be left alone.

It seemed that she succeeded in neither, because not only did she not take in one word, but her ears picked up the sound of approaching footsteps. Her heart began, forcefully, inexplicably, to hammer. She knew instinctively to whom those footsteps belonged.

Two drinks were placed on the small circular table a leg's length away. One glass, holding what was unmistakably sherry, was put on to a paper mat in front of her, the other, containing beer, on another mat not far from hers. The length of a man lowered itself beside her, a back sought the support of the upholstered rear of the bench, two long legs crossed indolently and came to rest a foot's touch from hers.

Cara's eyes shifted slightly from the book, contemplated the very masculine and disturbingly muscular legs, and shifted back to the page in front of her. The man lifted the tankard of beer and drank deeply. The tankard found its way back to the table.

'What are you reading?' Shaun Sutherland asked.

Dared she ignore the question? She decided instead to irritate in retaliation for the intrusive question. 'A book.'

There was not a movement, not a breath in response. She looked at him, saw the threat of revenge in the hooded eyes and smiled a quick, challenging smile, the kind of smile she would have given to Steven had she wanted to provoke him. It drew an immediate response. The eyes almost closed. They lingered on her face, exploring the oval shape of it, and evaluated the curved, full lips.

'Don't do that too often, Miss Hirst,' was the murmured reply, 'otherwise I might accept your—offer. I'm never slow in taking a woman up on her invitation.'

Invitation? Offer? She coloured deeply at his interpretation of her innocent smile. Innocent? No, she knew in her heart it had not been that. She had

merely given him a glimpse, perhaps a tantalising glimpse, like a curtain lifted and dropped back into place, of her true personality. But she had certainly not intended to incite, to inflame, to offer herself ...

She slapped her book shut and stood up. He moved swiftly, gripping her arm and pulling her down. Now they were touching, leg to leg, thigh to thigh. He had moved her even closer. She raised to him a burning face and pleading eyes. 'Please let me go.'

He shook his head and pointed to the sherry. 'I've bought you a drink. I don't recall that you've thanked me.'

'I didn't ask you to buy it.'

She felt his body grow taut at her acid reply. A hand reached out and fingers spread around her jaw, jerking her face towards him. 'Look here, *Miss Hirst*--' A storm brewing in those brown eyes and the alarm that rumbled through her made her want to run for cover. His anger lashed her, for her impertinence, her ingratitude—and something else besides. Cara could not put a name to it. In fact, with that gaze upon her, she could not even think.

Her jaw began to ache under that brutal grip and her eyes moistened with mute appeal. His expression changed, forcing up the pace of her pulse, drying her mouth and constricting her throat. But the grip slackened slowly and the brooding eyes grew hooded, concealing the expression within them. For a moment, an incredible, heart-stopping moment, she had thought those lips had every intention of seeking hers.

But it must have been that imagination she had denied possessing, because a moment later he had thrown away her chin with an action more of disgust than anger.

'Please excuse me.' He rose and left her, without a backward glance.

She had not wanted him there, but now he had gone, she wanted him back beside her. She wanted him back to apologise to him, to say with sincerity how sorry she was for her rudeness. She drank as much of the sherry as she

could manage and put it beside his half-filled tankard. In their unfinished state, they looked a little sad side by side.

It was imperative that she should see him again to translate into words this strange feeling of contrition for her impoliteness and ingratitude. In the entrance hall she looked hopefully at reception. He was not there—perhaps because his lady-friend was not on duty this evening? The thought, with its tinge of spite, pleased her, but only for a moment because she remembered her reason for wanting to see him. To apologise—yet again—and quickly.

It took only a few moments to climb the stairs and run along the corridor to her room. She opened the drawer in which she had put the money she owed him and scooped it into her hands. Now she would return the money provided, of course, she could track him down. If he was in his suite of rooms, would she dare to try to gain admittance?

But it wouldn't be necessary, she told herself, to go in. When he came to the door, she would hold out the money, explain briefly and go away again. It wouldn't need much courage, surely, to do just that?

It took a great deal more courage than Cara had calculated to open her own door, gaze across at his and force her footsteps to follow the path her eyes mapped out for them. It took even more courage to lift her hand and tap at the door.

Someone moved towards the door and as that person came nearer, so Cara's apprehension grew. What would she say to him? Would he listen to her apology or, after taking the money, would he shut the door in her face? If he did, she couldn't blame him. She had never spoken to anyone as presumptuously as she had spoken to him.

He had loosened his tie. It was almost as if it had become a noose round his neck and he had become impatient of it. His deep brown hair, with its glints of bronze, had become ruffled, as though he had run his fingers through it.

'What do you want?'

It was hardly an encouraging beginning. His tone intimidated her so much she almost forgot why she was there. She gazed up at him, pulling at the buttoned neck of her blouse. She managed, 'I just want to say I'm--'

'You'd better come in.'

The room was furnished as a lounge, but with a desk under the window. On the desk, amongst the papers and the reference books, was a typewriter. There was a sheet of paper in it, but it was blank, explaining perhaps his short temper, his slightly ruffled state. The words had not come, the thoughts had not flowed.

There were two armchairs and a fireside chair, a long, low coffee table and another table at which sometimes, no doubt, he ate his meals. Through a half-opened door she guessed there was a bedroom. Opening off that, she assumed, was a bathroom. Yes, it was a comfortable suite of rooms, overlooking the sea.

'Mr. Sutherland, I--' She looked at him, hoping for a softening of his lips, the gentling of his jaw, for the winter to leave his eyes. It just did not happen. The notes and coins in her clenched hand grew damp and creased. The view from the window, grey though the sea was, was more inviting than his chill expression.

'I'm sorry for the way I—I--' The apology she was forcing herself to make to this hard-faced man was far worse than she had anticipated. 'The way,' she continued, 'I speak to you.' He remained silent. 'I—I'll try to stop myself. No, no, not *try*.' She stole a glance at his face. It told her nothing. 'I mean, I'll *make* myself stop.' She moistened her lips. 'It was through you I got the job. I really should be grateful ...' For all the response she was getting, she might have been talking to herself in the mirror.

She opened her palm and with the other hand started to straighten the pound notes. As she did so, the book which she did not even realise she had brought with her fell from under her arm. Swiftly she bent to retrieve it and doing so, dropped the money. 'Oh!' she cried, and reached out with raking fingers to pick up the scattered coins and notes.

Scarlet-cheeked, she looked up to apologise yet again, only to find him crouching beside her. While she gathered the money, he picked up the book, then he straightened and flicking through the pages. Would he, she wondered, make a caustic comment?

He said nothing as she flattened the paper money and piled the coins on top of the notes, forming a small pyramid of cash on the carpet. She made a play of counting the money, trying to put off the moment when she would have to stand up and face him.

'Your book, Miss Hirst.'

She stood at last to take it from him and he said, 'You like history so much you spend your leisure hours reading it?'

'It's my subject, after all.'

'It's your work, yes, but is it also your relaxation?' As she considered his question, he went on, 'Don't you ever read lighter stuff? Novels, for instance?'

She ran her fingertips over the glossy cover of the book. Should she tell him what was in her mind? It was, after all, the truth. But wouldn't he laugh, tell her she was saying it to impress? She found some courage and replied, 'Yes, I read novels.' She glanced at him and immediately glanced away. 'Yours, for instance.'

There was a brief pause, then, 'You would hardly call my books "light" reading?'

'Some are.'

He lifted a shoulder. 'Perhaps, but still with a serious vein running through them. Would you agree with that?'

Was he laughing at her secretly or was he seriously seeking her opinion? He looked sincere enough as he waited for her answer.

She opened and closed the cover of the volume in her hand. 'Perhaps. Yes, on thinking about it, I do agree. But I—I haven't read all your books.'

'You astonish me.' He was smiling, softening the sarcasm.

She took him seriously. 'I buy as many as I can--'

'Buy them? You don't borrow them from a public library?'

She shook her head. 'I--' She coloured, not liking to go on, but he seemed to be waiting. 'I like them so much I just have to buy them, because I like to keep them and read them again. I--' She stopped. She was giving away too much.

'Carry on, Miss Hirst.' He spoke softly.

'I—save up and buy one whenever I can afford it.'

There was a long pause and she longed to know what he was thinking. 'You flatter me profoundly,' he said at last.

'But it's the truth,' she responded, her voice urgent in her effort to make him believe her.

Her eyes sought his, only to find that they had narrowed estimatingly, as if he were trying to assess her sincerity. If so, she could not blame him. How many women must have praised his work in order to ingratiate themselves, make him notice them, appreciate their charms? He looked down at the floor.

'What's that money doing down there? Is it a kind of sacrifice, an offering at the feet of the mighty?'

She followed his eyes, remembering suddenly the other reason for seeking him out. She crouched down and placed her palm over the pile of money, intending to scoop it up and hand it to him.

But a hand descended on to hers, holding it still. He was beside her, crouching as she was. He was touching her again, and she remembered the first time he had done so. At the interview in London he had lifted a lock of her hair and tested its texture. Their eyes were level now, his holding hers, seeing—what hidden thoughts, what secret feelings?

She was intensely aware of him. The smile which had quivered on her lips faded as she saw the curious look in his eyes. What was he seeking as he gazed at her? Was he trying to analyse her very soul, in order to use it in his writings, twist it to fit a picture in his imagination, savage it with the often biting impact of his words?

'Please, Mr. Sutherland,' she said weakly. For what was she asking—mercy from him in his searching contemplation of her character, or pleading silently with him not to ensnare her deepest feelings, to let her stay free of him, his charm, his innate and almost irresistible magnetism?

But his eyes were a woman-trap that would not let her go and from the depths of her being she cried silently, I've got Steven waiting for me patiently. Together we're going to earn enough to make a home for ourselves, have a family...

But Steven's touch had never made her heart thud as this man's touch was doing. Steven's eyes had never wrought such havoc with feelings which she did not even know she had—until now.

'What is it you want, Miss Hirst?' He was laughing at her now, his eyes mocking, maddening...

'My—my hand, Mr. Sutherland.'

He took up that hand and looked it over, the back of it, the long fingers with their well-shaped nails. He turned the hand, inspecting the palm, seeing how, after only a day or two, hard skin was forming where she grasped the handles of the wheelchair. His fingers rubbed at the toughening skin and as his eyes met hers, he frowned.

He stood then, and Cara gathered the money, straightening to stand beside him. With her arms outstretched, she offered him the money but omitted to provide a reason for her action.

It seemed, however, that he needed one. 'You're giving *me* money?' He laughed, rubbing his cheek thoughtfully. 'What have I done that requires payment? Read your palm, perhaps?'

'The money's yours, Mr. Sutherland. Don't you remember? The day you gave me this job--'

'How could I ever forget?'

She ignored his smiling provocation. 'You gave me money for expenses for my uniform and my train fare. I didn't need it all. So I'm giving you back the money I didn't spend.'

'You're *what*?'

'Giving you back,' she repeated faintly, 'the--'

'It can't be true! I must have created you in my own mind, imagined the impossible—a woman who is *honest*!'

'Please, Mr. Sutherland, take it.' She shuffled the notes into a neater pile.

But he took not the slightest notice. He was looking at her face, not the money. He was gazing at her through eyes which assessed and evaluated. 'Are you *always* honest, Miss Hirst? Do you never, ever tell a lie? *Act* a lie?'

She was so thrown off balance by the deadly accuracy of his question—his reasoned, penetrating question—that her body jerked and the money was again scattered over the floor.

'*Now* do you see what you've done?' she cried, quite illogically, and dived once more to retrieve the money.

Shaun did not stop her this time. Instead, he stood, hands on hips, and watched as she scrambled in a quite undignified fashion, over the floor. When she offered him the money again, he did not alter his position. Instead he nodded towards his desk.

Tut it there. I shall, in due course, give you a receipt. If I asked you for a detailed list of all the items you spent the rest of the money on, could you provide it?'

Was he being serious? Whether he was or not, she responded bravely to the challenge. 'It wouldn't be easy, Mr. Sutherland, because I didn't get receipts for everything, but,' with a smothered sigh, 'I suppose I could if you really insisted.'

She caught a glint of mockery. 'On second thoughts, I'll trust you, Miss Hirst. Do you consider yourself worthy of that trust?'

She turned to his desk, glad of the opportunity to hide the revealing colour which crept into her cheeks at his question. 'I—I hope so, Mr. Sutherland.'

'So do I, Miss Hirst.'

The veiled threat in his voice had her head spinning towards him, searching his face and at his cold look a touch of ice fingered her spine. He glanced at his watch, then at the typewriter. 'Is there anything else?'

It was plainly a hint. Had something, someone touched the magic button which had made the thoughts flow again, thoughts which he knew he must capture and commit to paper before they eluded him for ever?

Even so, she took offence. Her annoyance was as much with herself at giving him the opportunity to dismiss her as with him for actually doing it.

'Nothing else, Mr. Sutherland. I'm sorry if I've delayed you- and outstayed my welcome, but all I wanted to do was to give you back your money. It was you, after all, who invited me in.' She was aware that her tone held a touch of impertinence and that once again she had overstepped the bounds of

propriety, but her resentment at his sudden impatience had overridden her better judgement. Her answer aroused him to the edge of anger.

' "Welcome" didn't enter into it, Miss Hirst.' Which, she reflected, remembering the abruptness with which he had issued the invitation, was probably true. 'You said you wanted to see me. I could hardly talk to you while you stood out there and I in here.' His mouth tightened. 'Sometimes I do the polite thing, Miss Hirst. I don't always merit the unmannerly, ungentlemanly label you seem to have attached to me ever since you came. But where you're concerned, next time you present yourself on my doorstep—if there is a next time—I shall think twice before I invite you in.'

He watched her bend to pick up her book from the floor where, surprisingly, it had found its way from his hands. Then he went to the door, opened it wide and with cool, implacable eyes, watched her leave. Her head was high, her body rigid, but inside her emotions were in a storm of fury.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was the next day that Cara began to feel the effects of the constant stretching and straining of the muscles of her body. She awoke stiff almost beyond endurance. When, after helping Mrs. Driver from her bed to the bathroom, she contemplated the long day ahead, she sank on to a chair, adjusting the cushions behind her head. It was her employer's chair, placed beside the window so that she could, whenever she lifted her head, contemplate the attractions of the hotel gardens.

Cara wondered yet again how long she would be able to stand the stresses and strains upon not only her body, but her patience. For how long would the generous salary remain sufficient incentive to endure the rules and regulations imposed by her sometimes irascible employer, the insults which, with intolerable regularity, were flung her way when she made the slightest error, and never a word of gratitude when she did something right?

Mrs. Driver's stick struck three times on the tiled bathroom floor. With a sigh, Cara rose and responded to the call. She had moved quickly, but not, it seemed, fast enough for Mrs. Flora Driver.

'You'll have to learn,' said Mrs. Driver, 'to be quicker than that. I cannot tolerate slowness in my companion- helps.'

With Cara's arm firmly supporting hers, and her free arm and hand taking the remaining weight of her body on the specially designed walking stick, Mrs. Driver moved back into the bedroom.

Her eyes, still keen despite her age and disability, looked towards the seat at the window. 'Who,' she demanded, 'has been interfering with my chair? You, Miss Hirst? What have you done to it? Have you *sat* in it?'

It was not in Cara to lie again. It was enough that she had denied the existence of a boy-friend. 'I'm sorry, Mrs. Driver, but I was so tired, I--'

'*Tired?* At this time of the morning? You'll have to do better than that. And please don't sit in my chair again. You have disturbed the cushion. Now, will you please help me with my dressing, then we will breakfast.'

It was after Cara had read from the newspaper to her employer and while they were drinking their morning coffee that Shaun Sutherland sauntered in. It seemed he had been walking, because his dark hair was windblown and he ran a hand through it in an attempt to tidy it. He had about him the look of freedom, to walk when he chose, to work when he chose. The fresh air which had blown about him clung to his body and he brought into the slightly claustrophobic room—Mrs. Driver rarely allowed the windows to be opened—a feeling of sea and space and sky.

Cara had a glimpse—a fleeting, tantalising glimpse—of sharing with this man that freedom which was his for the taking, of walking with him, her hand in his, along the cliffs, over the sand dunes, walking round the reeds and grasses that grew on the shore. The joy, her errant mind whispered, that would be! Of having him beside her, looking up into his laughing face, telling him her innermost thoughts and knowing, writer that he was, that he would understand what she was trying to say. A matching of their intellect, a pooling of their ideas, a meeting of their bodies, and the clinging of their lips ...

With a jerk of fright she looked up at him. He was not laughing, he was not holding her hand. He was not touching her in any way. There was nothing about him of the friend, the lover she had pictured so foolishly, so tormentingly, in her mind.

His curious expression as he looked down at her filled her with dread. Was he guessing again at her thoughts, and if so, how accurate was he being? And what was she doing, anyway, imagining such things? The man she had 'seen' and 'felt' beside her must have been Steven, not Shaun Sutherland. But Steven's hair was light, not dark, and when they talked, they spoke of everyday things...

'She told me she was tired, Shaun,' his aunt greeted him, almost accusingly as if he were to blame for choosing the girl. 'At her age! First thing in the morning!'

Cara explained hastily, 'It wasn't so much that I was tired, Mrs. Driver, as that my arms and legs ached, my back--' She checked herself. What was she

doing, talking herself into dismissal? Confessing that the job was beyond her strength?

'You were aware of what the job entailed when I appointed you, Miss Hirst,' Shaun said, a little sharply.

'Oh, but I'm not complaining,' Cara said urgently. 'It's just that I'm more used to standing in front of a blackboard with a piece of chalk in my hand than pushing--' How should she go on? Pushing invalid ladies about in wheelchairs which should have been consigned years ago to the rubbish heap? 'I'll get used to it, Mr. Sutherland, given time.'

'It's not I you should be pleading with, Miss Hirst,' was the nephew's tart comment. 'I'm not your employer. It's for my aunt to decide whether she "gives you time" or not.'

'You sound, my dear Shaun, as if by tying her to me I have sentenced her to life imprisonment!'

Shaun smiled. 'There's many a true word, Aunt--'

'You and your cliches, young man! You should be ashamed of yourself. Now, Miss Hirst, get me dressed for a morning visit. I've been invited for coffee at a friend's cottage in the village. You're not invited, of course.'

Mrs. Driver's bluntness made Cara wince.

Shaun saw it. 'Like a lot of other things about this job, Miss Hirst,' he said with a humourless smile, 'you'll have to get used to my aunt's brusque manner. And also the subordinate role you're constantly called upon to play. Dancing attendance on a demanding old lady is very different from standing in front of a subdued and well-disciplined class of school children.'

She looked up at him. He had to be joking! Subdued and well-disciplined? But how was he to know her teaching history, the reason for her resignation from her teaching post without any other employment in view?

'Not so much of the old, young man!' Mrs. Driver reprimanded. 'Arthritic I may be, but I'm not senile yet.'

'My apologies, Aunt. I merely used the expression to emphasise my point.'

'Don't be clever at this time of the day, Shaun,' his aunt commented. 'It gives me a headache. Continue with my toilet, Miss Hirst. Ignore my nephew. His head is far too big. Success has gone to it and made it twice the size it used to be!'

Cara smiled at the old lady's rare humour and looked up at the object of her comments. He was smiling, too, and somehow their smiles caught at each other and entwined, like lovers meeting. His smile transformed his features, giving them life and warmth. There was the charm which, on the few occasions on which he chose to use it, could be devastating to a woman's peace of mind. Already she acknowledged with dismay, he had disturbed hers, but whether it was beyond recall, she had yet to discover.

He was using that charm now and he watched with smiling interest the deep colour he had brought to her cheeks. So perceptive was he, it was almost as if he had his finger on her pulse and was feeling its accelerated beat. Mrs. Driver looked from one to the other, missing nothing.

'He's at it again, Miss Hirst. Take no notice. What are you aiming to do, Shaun, break this girl's heart and lose her her job at one and the same time? Because she couldn't stay here, you know, if she became emotionally involved with you. It wouldn't do, it just wouldn't do at all.'

'He couldn't possibly break my heart, Mrs. Driver,' Cara blurted out defiantly, before she could check herself. 'It's--' She stopped just before the damage was done.

It's already taken, she had so nearly said.

'It's—?' Shaun Sutherland queried, the warmth in his eyes giving place to a cool curiosity. 'Carry on, Miss Hirst. Don't break off, like a well-written serial, at the most interesting point. It's--?'

'Unbreakable,' she finished feebly.

Slowly, hands in jacket pockets, he walked towards her. 'You wouldn't be challenging me?' he asked softly.

'Shaun, behave yourself!' his aunt reproved. 'Sharpen your amorous claws on one of the many women in your life, not this girl. She's plain, she's unattractively dressed. Use your eyes, boy. She's not your cup of tea at all!'

'Plain? Unattractive?' His eyes lowered to the prim, buttoned-up blouse. Was he remembering the tight, white sweater she had inadvertently worn under that black, thick coat on the day of her interview? But it seemed from what he said that he was only seeing the stark regulation uniform. No doubt he had obliterated from his mind all memory of the long blonde hair, the full, rounded shape which had so caught his eye that day in the London hotel room.

'Yes, Aunt, maybe you're right. I like beauty in any woman in whom I take an interest. Femininity plus, in fact. Your new companion-help hardly qualifies in that respect.'

With which insulting statement, he left them.

Mrs. Driver's friend lived in a small, neat cottage just off the main street of the village. Her name was Miss Hewson and she was white-haired and charming. She even invited Cara to join them for coffee. But Mrs. Driver would not hear of it. She dismissed Cara peremptorily. 'Please return to collect me at midday precisely.'

Which, Cara calculated, gives me one and three-quarter hours in which to amuse myself. Although freedom of any kind was a pleasant prospect, she wondered what she would find to do in such a small place.

There was a stationer's and bookseller's shop combined, and she was drawn to it by the women's magazines on display. But deep down she was aware that it was not really the magazines which drew her, it was the sight of row

upon row of paperback books she could not resist. And it was one particular publishers' name she sought, telling herself she was only looking out of curiosity.

There they were, she thought excitedly, then searched for the name which she knew so well, but which, she told herself severely, was *not* the reason for her entering the shop in the first place.

It had happened before, so many times, and it was happening now. Her hand was reaching out, almost of its own accord, towards a Shaun Sutherland novel. It was one which she had not seen and must have been his latest out in paperback. It was in her hand, the picture on the cover symbolic more than realistic. The tide intrigued and as she gazed at it she visualised the man who had written the book. Where had he found the inspiration for such a tide? *A Day With No Tomorrow*. What, she wondered, did it mean?

The only way she could discover the answer, she told herself, was to look. She wouldn't buy it, she hadn't the money to spare, but there was no reason why she shouldn't open it, read a few pages ... From the first sentence on, she was caught, by the flow, the fluency of the words, the images conjured up in the mind by the skill of the writer. . And coming between her eyes and the pages, a face kept intruding, a face with character, eyes keen and perceptive, a full-lipped mouth twisted into a sardonic smile.

Savage with his characters, his aunt had said. Honest until it hurt, Cara thought, agreeing with his aunt. Even in the love scenes, he was relentless and unsparing. Yet in his search for truth, it was plain that he felt for his characters as well as with them. There was compassion and tenderness, too.

What, her straying mind wondered, would his love- making be like—would there be compassion and tenderness in that? Cruelty, yes—that, with a shiver, she could envisage. Why, then, the pounding of her heart at the vision she saw of Shaun with emotions unleashed and unrestrained; Shaun demanding and, no doubt eventually receiving, complete surrender?

'Are you going to buy it?' The deep, amused voice was beside her, jolting her from her dreams of love—Shaun Sutherland's love.

She closed the book quickly and pushed it back on to the shelf. 'I—I was just interested, that's all.' She turned away, but his hand caught her arm and detained her.

'That's all?' He pretended to look hurt. 'No comment on my work, no criticism to offer? No praise? After all, when my aunt told you my name, you paid me a great compliment. Two, in fact.'

She wrinkled her brow, trying to remember exactly what she had said. 'That I thought you were the finest novelist this century? Yes, I meant it.'

He smiled. 'You also said something else.' She frowned and looked up at him questioningly. 'That I was wonderful.'

They laughed together and his hand stretched out to take hold of a copy of his book. 'I meant as an author, not as a--'

He looked at her quizzically. 'Carry on, Miss Hirst. I can take it. "Man", you were going to say.'

She found to her dismay that she couldn't complete the sentence, and that could mean only one thing. She did think he was wonderful—as a man!

He watched the faint colour appear and smiled. She made for the door, but he called after her. 'Don't go away!'

At the counter he paid for the book, joking with the girl sales assistant, who seemed to know him well. Cara lingered by the magazines until he had finished, then she went outside.

He followed and handed her the book, now in a paper bag.

'For me?'

He nodded. 'Open the book.'

Inside he had written, 'To Cara Hirst, my sternest—and gentlest—critic.'

She flushed with pleasure, conscious of the compliment he had paid her, wishing with a strange urgency to show him her gratitude in a tangible—and forbidden—way. She wanted to reach up and fling her arms round his neck, to find that hard, cynical mouth with hers and with the softness of her lips infuse into his a tenderness they did not now possess.

Frightened by the startling piece of self-knowledge which had just been revealed to her, and acutely embarrassed by the way her companion was studying her face, she could manage only a faint, 'Thank you very much.'

She wanted to run away and hide, to have the time to analyse the deep, the almost primitive feelings this man could arouse in her.

He seemed a little puzzled by her restrained response to his gift and she felt she must try a little harder to convey to him her pleasure.

'It—it was very kind of you to buy it for me. And for writing in it and signing it.' The words still sounded stilted and she said with a spurt of genuine feeling, taking herself by surprise, 'I shall treasure it all my life.'

'Good.' With a taunting grin, 'You've done my ego a power of good. As a writer, I hasten to add, only as a writer. Never let it be said that I please you as a man.'

If only he knew! Just how much was something she was only beginning to learn herself. And she would never tell him as long as she lived.

'Now,' he grasped her wrist and consulted his watch, 'we have three-quarters of an hour to use up before my revered and demanding aunt requests your presence. Have you had coffee? No? Then you must have it with me.'

They patronised a cafe with windows overlooking the harbour. The North Sea was behaving as expected in late March. Now and then the sun came from behind a bank of clouds. The coffee was warming and, as Cara drank it, savouring every drop and every minute that passed, she told herself, Shaun Sutherland is sitting opposite me, the celebrated writer, who could have, if he wished, at his beck and call the most beautiful women in high society. I have his book in my pocket. It's part of him, as all books are part of their

authors. But that is the nearest I shall ever get to him, and it's something I must never forget.

Across the road was the jutting arm of a jetty which formed part of a small harbour. Fishermen were busy with their nets, small vans came and went, people wandered in and out of the wooden huts and boating stations which had been built alongside it.

'Over there,' Shaun indicated the harbour, 'I have a motor boat. In good weather, I go out in it, riding the waves, speeding across the water.' His eyes betrayed that his thoughts had broken loose, as sometimes his body did, of all ties of land and people.

Cara grew oddly jealous of his detachment and sought for a question to ask to make him aware of her again. 'Do you go anywhere in particular?'

She had brought him back successfully and was strangely pleased, as though she had lost him and found him again.

'Not always. But usually I make for those off-shore islands.'

'Where the lighthouse is? I saw from the notice board at the hotel that they're called Wildsea Islands.'

He nodded. 'They're a bird sanctuary. They belong to the owner of Wildsea Castle.'

She took him up excitedly. 'That building you can see through the mist?'

He nodded. 'The islands are closed to the public, but at certain times of the year ornithologists are allowed free access to it.'

She frowned. 'You're not an ornithologist, are you?'

There was a pause, then, with a smile, 'No, but I *am* Shaun Sutherland.'

'You mean the owner allows you to go there because

'I'm a writer, yes.'

'I'm sorry,' she smiled faintly, 'I forgot you were famous.'

'Thanks.' He stirred his coffee. 'That's the best compliment any woman has paid me for a long time. The forgetting, I mean.'

His smile met hers and her pulses leapt. She pretended to become absorbed with the pattern on the cup. That probing gaze must not be allowed to monitor her mind by using her eyes as a television screen on which her secret thoughts appeared for his private viewing.

They drank in silence, with the tea room noises, the chink of crockery, the murmur of other people's talk forming a blur of sound around them.

Then Cara asked, 'Is Wildsea Castle open to the public?'

'It used to be, but not now.'

She was disappointed and showed it. 'It must be fabulous inside. I'd love to look around it. It's very selfish of the owners to keep such a place to themselves. It must be very old.'

'Around two hundred and fifty years. Parts of it are even older.'

'I suppose you know about it because you live so near?'

'Ask any of the inhabitants of the village and they'll tell you about it, too. They're proud of "their" castle, as they call it.'

She twisted in her seat so that she could look at the building through the tea-room window. The castle was some way behind them and even more distant from the village than from the hotel. 'It intrigues me. Somehow it draws me.' She laughed. 'I don't know why. Aren't you, as a writer, interested in it?'

He moved the ash tray abstractedly. 'Not my line of country. Menacing castle, ghostly figures—I leave that to other writers. I write about reality, not dreams.'

Dreams, he said. But this was a dream, sitting here with Shaun Sutherland, talking to him, his hand a mere touch away. When he went out to those islands, was he always alone? Was there no special woman in his life? She supposed not. A wife and family would act as a tie to a man who needed to wander the world, seeking background for his books, living the life he wrote about, sometimes stark, brutally so at times, but always, always real. Even on the island, did he never escape from reality?

He said abruptly, 'There's a faraway look on your face. There's something troubling you. What is it?'

She held her breath, seeking a plausible answer. How could she tell him, 'I'm thinking about you'? She improvised, 'The—the scene out there, the sea, how—how grey it is.'

He gave a brief smile. 'At this moment the sea is blue. The sun has come out. The greyiness is in your eyes, which goes some way to proving I was right. So tell me.'

She must guard her expression when she was with this man. What was he reading in her face? Her secrets about her past, her future? That she was there on false pretences, on a temporary basis in spite of his aunt's belief that she was there for the rest of her life? There must be some reason why he was asking for an answer.

Pressing her lips together, she shook her head and stared into her coffee cup.

After a thoughtful silence he asked, 'You're not pining?'

Her head came up. 'For what?'

'Shouldn't you have said, "For whom"?' Again she caught her breath. How much did this man know? And if so, how? Steven had not written a word to her since she came, nor had she communicated with him.

'Someone in your life,' Shaun persisted, 'past or present?' Flustered, she stared at him. How long would his questions go on? Until he got at the truth? Did he *want* her to lose the job? Had she proved so inefficient that he considered he had made a mistake in appointing her? 'Your parents, perhaps?' he queried.

That she could answer with equanimity. 'I have a father, but no mother. She died when I was very young. My father married again. I'm very fond of him, and of my stepmother.'

'So no trouble there?'

'None at all.' His sudden and strangely suspicious probing nettled and worried her. Anxiety quickened her pulse and nibbled at her temper. Sensitive and guilty as she already was about possessing that forbidden creature, a boy-friend, and knowing that that was the cause of her predecessor's dismissal, Shaun Sutherland, who was eyeing her keenly, seemed to have passed from pleasant companion to threatening inquisitor.

But how could she have expected this man, writer that he was, with his analysing kind of mind, not to dig and delve into someone's character until he struck the truth, like a goldminer the precious yellow metal he had been searching for?

She ran a thumb nail along the grain of the woven place mat. 'Why are you worrying yourself about my personal life?' Her voice sounded edgy and "She knew that to him even that could hold some significance, which indeed it did. She found herself over-reacting. 'You don't owe me anything, certainly not concern for my emotional health.' She told herself to speak with care because his questions seemed to be setting a trap and every word she spoke might be a give-away to someone who questioned as cleverly as he did. 'I feel—shall we say?—a certain amount of responsibility for your well-being. After all, I gave you the job.'

Her eyes were defensive, revealingly so. 'I asked for it. If I hadn't wanted it, I wouldn't have attended the interview, would I?'

'You might. Something—or someone—might have pressurised you into taking it on against your will.'

Skilfully he seemed to be doing his utmost to draw the truth from her. Fear that he would one day come upon it from her own unguarded lips made her indiscreet. Inside she cried to herself to stop. More than anything she wanted to be friends with this man. If she did not control her tongue now, she could drive a wedge between them that might never be removed. But it was no use, the words came out of their own accord.

She pushed back her chair and stood up. 'What are you trying to discover, Mr. Sutherland? That I have a "hidden fiance" like my predecessor? Then you could tell your aunt and have me dismissed?'

For a few seconds he looked at her intently, then a veil came down over his eyes. He stood, pushing in his chair and going to the door. The bell chimed as he opened it and showed her out.

'I think it's time,' he consulted his watch, 'you went about your duties. When you reach my aunt, I calculate that you'll be over ten minutes late. If there's one thing she can't stand, it's a bad time-keeper. Don't be surprised if you find her fractious and difficult to handle.'

Disappointment at the way their relationship, which earlier had seemed so promising, had deteriorated made her irrational and rash. She choked out, 'You were aware of the passing of time as much as I was. Why didn't you remind me?' ,

His eyes regarded her coolly. 'Don't look upon me as your private alarm clock, Miss Hirst. Don't look on me as your "private" anything. I'm not here to prompt you as to where you should or should not be at any given moment. I live my own life, my aunt lives hers, together with her companion-help. You, in case you've forgotten, are that companion-help. Now, if you'll please excuse me ...' He crossed the road and made his way down to the harbour wall.

She ran all the way to Mrs. Driver's friend's cottage. Mrs. Driver was, as her nephew had predicted, angry. All the way back to the hotel she raged. 'You

have been showing promise,' Mrs. Driver said. 'Now you let me down in this tardy fashion. I won't have it, Miss Hirst, I simply won't have it!'

Gasping for breath, Cara pushed the ancient wheelchair, with its burdensome occupant, up the hill. It was as unrelenting in its gradient as Mrs. Driver was in her self- righteous anger. So long did it seem to take them to reach the hotel, Cara swore it must have moved. Of their own accord her legs slowed and at the moment when she felt she could not take any more of either Mrs. Driver's endless abuse or her pitiless weight, a car drew up beside them.

It was large, it was expensive and its luxurious interior was a glimpse of heaven to Cara's exhausted body. Its driver leaned across and opened the window.

'Like a lift, Aunt Flora?'

'A lift, boy? Good heavens, no! I'm not in the least tired. It's fresh air I want, not the stuffy atmosphere of your car, however much it might have cost, however many home comforts it offers.'

Shaun shrugged and for a moment his eyes rested on Cara. Her flushed face, her heavy breathing could not have passed him by. He was too observant for that. But the pleading look which Cara gave him, a look which was purely involuntary and came from her very depths, made no impression.

He looked ahead. 'It's your decision, Aunt.' He drew away from the kerb and disappeared into the distance.

It was a week before Cara saw Shaun Sutherland again. 'He's gone away,' his aunt informed her. 'I never ask where, I never ask why. He has a woman friend in London and if he visits her occasionally, it's no business of mine.'

When Cara did see him again, it was across the dining- room and he was sitting alone. He acknowledged his aunt with a quick, smiling salute as if he

had never been away. A mere nod was all Cara received, but when his dinner was over, he strolled between the tables to join them.

Cara had grown so accustomed to helping Mrs. Driver in and out of her chair, she did it with ease. But she still had not grown used to pushing, pulling and swinging the old wheelchair with its passenger whose weight, far from growing less, seemed to increase each day.

'Come along, Miss Hirst,' said Mrs. Driver, seeing her nephew approach.

Cara, flustered by Shaun's presence, and by the strange pleasure she felt at seeing him again, did not move from her seat. Odd how it seemed he had never been away. Had he been in her mind so much he had been 'present' even in his absence? They had parted on bad terms. Had he forgiven her yet for her rudeness?

'Come *along*, Miss Hirst,' said Mrs. Driver, with growing impatience. 'You've seen my nephew before. You're staring at him like a lovesick girl.'

The nephew's eyebrows rose slowly. ' "Lovesick?" I thought that was an emotion which was forbidden in your companion-helps, Aunt. Don't they all have to be pure, unsullied virgins, and with every intention of remaining that way?'

'Shaun! You simply must not speak like that in front of Miss Hirst.'

They moved towards the swing doors and Shaun held them open for Cara to push the wheelchair through.

'Must I not?' An eyebrow rose sardonically. 'You think, you sincerely believe that she has never known what a man's mouth on hers feels like? That with a shape like hers--'

They were waiting for the lift now. 'Shape? What shape?' Mrs. Driver eyed the white button-up blouse and black skirt which she had ordered Cara to wear. 'How do you know she's got a shape?'

The lift arrived and two people got out. Cara pushed and pulled the wheelchair into it. 'In that outfit, that's a very good question. But--'

Please! Cara's eyes pleaded, and Shaun laughed, enjoying her discomfiture.

'Never ask a man such a question, Aunt Flora. He has his ways of—looking, seeing, imagining.'

'You and your imagination!' They had arrived at the first floor. The doors came open, the chair was pushed into the corridor. The lift went away. 'Keep it for your books. It's over-active. Miss Hirst has no shape. You have only to look at her to see.'

'My aunt has spoken, Miss Hirst,' Shaun Sutherland said softly, walking at Cara's side. 'You have no shape. You have no femininity. You have no allure. How could any man ever find anything in you to interest him?'

'Stop whispering, Shaun,' his aunt said, as they walked behind her. 'Tell me what you're saying to Miss Hirst.'

Shaun smiled enigmatically at Cara, lifted his hand to his aunt and went on his way.

It was early April now, and daylight lingered long enough for Cara to think of taking a twilight walk. One evening, when her employer was installed in front of the television set, Cara decided to write to Steven. After that she would slip out and post it and go in whichever direction her feet decided to take her. Deep down she knew exactly where that would be.

She wrote her letter, telling Steven about her work and about the quiet life she was leading, but making no mention of her employer's nephew. In a hurried postscript she instructed Steven not to try to contact her in any way, 'Let me do the writing,' she said. 'For some reason I can't understand, I'm under suspicion already.' She did not say by whom.

It was, she had to admit, a curiously stilted letter, considering Steven was the man she was one day intending to marry. 'I'm just not in the mood,' she told herself, finding an envelope and addressing it. She pulled on her jacket, the regulation jacket which matched the regulation skirt.

Looking in the mirror while she combed her hair, she managed by an effort of will to avoid her reflected image. It happened every time she looked at herself—part of her subconscious mind would come into action and blot out the dull, unattractive picture she presented. Her hair was growing again. She wondered how long it would be before her employer noticed and ordered her to have it cut.

She longed to reach out for eye-shadow and lipstick, for all the cosmetics she had used when she had been free to do as she pleased, before all her normal feminine instincts had been strait-jacketed by order of Mrs. Flora Driver.

She picked up her letter and made for the stairs leading down to the entrance foyer. Shaun was there again, leaning on the counter, a drink near his hand. Behind the counter was the red-haired receptionist. Her name, Cara had learned, was Valerie Pendle. Since the name of the hotel owners was also Pendle, Cara assumed she was their daughter. It proved, Cara had thought when told, how correct she had been in guessing that the young woman was no ordinary employee.

When Shaun heard Cara's footsteps, he turned. It was almost as if he knew who it was by the sound of them. He eyed the girl, he eyed the letter. He watched that letter being pushed, address side down, into the black jacket pocket. The action, agitated as it was, must have told a man with his perception a great "deal, but his face, when Cara raised guilty eyes to look at it, was blank. She wished she could read it, as she could read the pages of his books. But there was not a sentence in his cool, hazel eyes, not a phrase about his hard jawline, not a word given away by his firm, cynical mouth.

'Going out?'

Cara nodded, smiling sweetly in an attempt to deflect his suspicions, although why she considered he had any suspicions about her she could not

understand. 'To post a letter,' she offered. He leant back against the counter, arms folded. 'To—to a friend, a—a girl friend, of course,' she added quickly, too quickly.

He smiled, a slow smile which held no humour or friendliness but something else—surely it wasn't disbelief? Cara looked uncertainly from the man to the girl behind the counter. There was no smile on her face. The slanting eyes were dwelling with cool contempt at the way Cara was dressed. Cara wanted to cry, It's not my fault I'm dressed like this. I could look every bit as attractive as you, if I were given the chance.

But what would be the use? She swung through the entrance door, leaving the two pairs of watching eyes behind her. The post box was in the opposite direction from the castle, being some way towards the village. Having pushed her letter into its eager mouth, she turned from it with relief, as though she had dropped a great burden from her.

Then she made her way back towards the hotel, but crossing the road so that she would not have to pass its entrance doors. To her right was the sand and the ebbing tide. In the distance, but growing nearer and larger with every step, was the building which had haunted her ever since she came. It seemed, with its turrets and great splendour, to hold some deep significance for her.

Wildsea Castle—it was an appropriate name for the place. It stood high on the cliffs overlooking the sea, keeping constant watch on the islands which bore its name.

Cara descended to the beach, each step taking her nearer the castle. The tide was a long way out. Cara's footsteps slowed and stopped. She glanced round, making sure she was alone. No, there was no one else about, no one to see her removing her shoes and baring her feet. Whether it was an act of defiance, or in deference to the magnificence of the great building towards which she was moving, she did not bother to consider.

It was a delight to feel the wet sand push between her toes, to stand and feel the water bubble up around her ankles. It was, she felt, the most spontaneous and natural act she had made since she had kissed Steven goodbye at the

railway station in London. Having begun, why should she stop? Now that she was out of sight of the hotel, who was there to see her?

She pulled off her jacket, rolling the waistband of her skirt so that the hem came up to her knees. Her blouse? The merest hesitation, then the top button was unfastened, the second button, too. She widened the neckline until the breeze blew coolly as far as it dared. She actually felt human again!

Footsteps passed to and fro on the pavement along the road some distance behind her, but her ears were deaf to them. The sense of freedom was as heady as vintage wine and she flung herself on the sands and lay full-length, an arm across her eyes as though the sun was streaming down. But it was the moon that was rising over the sea.

She rolled on to her front and kicked out her legs. Moon- bathing! She laughed out loud at her own joke. The shore glinted silver as the daylight receded. After a while she stood and dusted herself free of sand, continuing her walk. The castle beckoned.

A great hill-like mound rose from the shore. On the top, like an enormous, ancient crown, stood Wildsea Castle. Broodingly it gazed over the North Sea, enigmatic and magnificent as the twilight deepened and the sky grew darker.

It was necessary to make her way to the pavement if she was to reach the castle. Replacing her shoes, she carried the jacket over her shoulder. The road which led directly to the castle branched off the main road in a great sweeping curve, leading up to the main entrance.

Stone steps led to a heavy wooden door and with reverence spiced with delight at her own daring, Cara walked up the steps, passing between the columns which towered on each side of the entrance. The moon glowed softly on the carved stonework high above the portico.

For no reason at all—or it might have been the high- pitched cry of a seagull—fear touched Cara's heart. Something was warning her, 'Get away, go now while you still have time,' but it was too late. The entrance door

creaked open. Two shadows stood there. One was of a woman, short, plump, hands clasped in front of her.

The other was of a man, tall, distinguished, his hair dark in the moonlight, his voice—such a familiar voice!—speaking pleasantly but with undoubted authority. Even if Cara had heard what he was saying, the words would have been meaningless. She would not have understood because she was petrified with fright. Her brain was telling her that it was necessary, it was *vital* that she moved, now, before she was discovered! But her feet would not obey the commands of her brain.

The man looked up, his eyes drawn involuntarily by hers. At that moment, movement was restored to her limbs and she plunged back down the steps. The door clanged shut, footsteps followed hers some way behind. Fear had her racing faster than she had ever run before. He must not catch up with her! He could not have seen in that short glimpse who she was, only that she was female and an inquisitive—too inquisitive—passer-by. *So why should he follow?*

Down the sloping road she ran, on to the pavement and in and out amongst the sand dunes. Footsteps followed relentlessly, increasing in speed as she increased hers. Was it a stranger chasing her? Had she been wrong in assuming that the voice was Shaun Sutherland's? How could it have been? He had no connection with Wildsea Castle. Wouldn't he have told her?

She had no idea of the direction in which she was running, only that she must get away. Up the dunes she ran and down again, but the pace was taking its toll. She could not keep it up, her pursuer was gaining on her.

'Cara!' The voice rang out, but she defied its authority. '*Cara!*'³ It came again, nearer this time, and she knew she must make an even greater effort to escape. Her clothes were in no fit condition to be seen by this man, who had hired her and no doubt, if he chose, could also exercise the right to fire her as being unfit for the job.

A hand came out and caught her swinging arm. Her progress came to an abrupt halt. She was jerked round, but she tripped over a tuft of grass and fell headlong, lying face down, winded and gasping for breath.

Hands reached down and turned her over so that she was lying on her back. Shaun Sutherland was standing above her, a foot planted firmly on each side of her, hands on his hips.

Her jacket had been flung from her grasp when she had fallen. The neck of her blouse was thrown open and the cool air stroked the bareness of her throat. Her breasts rose and fell, not so much in a search for air, as with fear and— could she deny it?—a thrill of apprehension.

His eyes gleamed in the silver light, his body towered over her, the muscles of his legs, revealed rather than concealed by the moonlight, stood out, sinewy and powerful. They had carried him with ease in his pursuit of her. And now they held him taut, stretching like a giant above her, his head outlined against the moon-tipped clouds.

She lay there tense, nervous, waiting—for what? If it were Steven—but Steven never made her feel this way, never had her hoping, longing ...He bent and gripped her wrist, pulling her up in one swift movement to face him. The sand fell away from her. The moonlight was on her and his eyes, in shadow, roved over her.

'You impostor,' he muttered, 'you little impostor!'

CHAPTER FIVE

'I don't know what you mean.' Cara brushed herself down, pretending nonchalance but unable to quell the shellburst of fear inside her. 'My jacket,' she said carelessly, looking about her, but two hands fastened on the shoulders and brought her round to face him again.

'So you don't know what I mean?' The moonlight caught the glitter in his eyes but left the rest of his face in shadow. 'You lie there underneath me, your blouse unbuttoned, your attitude abandoned and provocative in the extreme, you invite me to join you down on the sand ...'

With all her strength, she struggled. 'It's not true and you know it!'

His hands moved down to her arms and with little difficulty held her still. 'You really expect me to believe,' he went on as though she had not spoken, 'that no man has ever touched you, that you don't know the pleasure of a man's lovemaking?'

'No, I--' she lied, 'I—I don't. You're only saying it to force me into a false "confession" so that you can tell your aunt and make me lose my job.'

'You don't, you say?' he murmured, ignoring her accusation. 'There's one way, and one way only, to find out . . .' Slowly he drew her towards him. I should be running, she told herself, I should be running for my life ...

His arms slid round her and she experienced the constricting pressure of his chest, the lean length of him against her trembling body. His mouth came down on hers, punishing at first, then easing to a coaxing softness as his stroking hands soothed away the tension in her limbs. She had become, entirely against her will, an accomplice in the detective work he was carrying out on her feminine reflexes, his research into her responses to male desire.

She would have had the kissing and the caressing go on for ever, but too soon the experiment ended and he held her away. It was impossible to meet his glinting eyes. Her head drooped as he said exultantly, 'I was right, I was

right!' With his bunched fist he forced her head upwards and he said between his teeth, 'Now tell me the truth about yourself.'

'Mr. Sutherland,' she murmured, closing her eyes and trying to still her trembling lips—how could a man's kiss make you cry? 'I—I don't want to lose my job. Now, *please* in a whisper, 'will you let me go?'

Her eyes flickered open and in the moon's light their gazes locked and held. He could not have missed the tears. She was pleading silently for her livelihood and for her future—but with whom?

He released her. She found her coat and, with it slung over her shoulder, wandered along the shore to the hotel. Once she glanced back, but he was not following. He was standing there, hands in pockets, watching as she walked away. Cara was fifteen minutes late. She had had to spend the time tidying her clothes, combing her hair and brushing herself free of sand.

Mrs. Driver was angry. Extremely so, she said, banging her stick on the carpeted floor. The television programme which had taken the place of the film was one she particularly disliked. And what was more, she said, she would now be fifteen minutes behind schedule in her routine for retiring to bed.

'If it happens again,' Mrs. Driver raged, 'I shall have no option but to dismiss you, Miss Hirst. Something I absolutely insist on is punctuality in my companion-helps.'

'Blame me, Aunt.' Shaun had come in. 'We met while Miss Hirst was out walking, and I--' with a lazy smile at Cara, 'I delayed her.'

She knew that he was remembering the kiss, as she was, and she was forced to turn away to hide her heightened colour.

Mrs. Driver was unappeased. 'I don't care if it was royalty itself who delayed her, she should have taken her leave politely but firmly and arrived back here at the specified time. I repeat, if it happens again, Miss Hirst--'

'If you dismiss her, Aunt,' Shaun said quietly, 'and leave yourself without a companion again, I'm afraid you won't be able to rely on me to conduct the interviews next time. However inviting the salary you offer, there are not many young women around these days who would be willing to submit to your tyrannical rules and regulations, disguise their femininity and, at your command, keep themselves untouched by man just to please you. A girl has to be powerfully motivated to take on this job at all.' Having for some inexplicable reason come to her aid, he now turned sarcastic, narrowed eyes to Cara. 'Miss Hirst, with her qualifications and experience in other fields, must have been powerfully motivated indeed. Were you, Miss Hirst? You never gave me a really satisfactory reason for wanting this job.'

She looked at him wildly. After protecting her from his aunt's tirade and condemnation, why was he now subjecting her to this searching interrogation?

'I told you, I needed the money, Mr. Sutherland, for— for--'

Now it was Mrs. Driver who unwittingly came to her aid. 'Come along, girl. Having delayed my bedtime by nearly half an hour, stop this gossiping and kindly do the work I'm paying you to do. Shaun,' Mrs. Driver gestured with her stick, 'kindly take your leave.'

Her nephew did as he was told, wishing his aunt good night. Just before he went out, he said to Cara, 'If you take yourself to the lounge this evening, Cara, look out for me. I might, given enough encouragement, be *motivated* into buying you a drink.'

Mrs. Driver intercepted the look that passed between them—<the shy, quick glance from Cara and the sardonic half-smile from her nephew. And there was no doubt at all, Cara, thought, her heart beating painfully at the hint of familiarity in Shaun's voice, that Mrs. Driver had neither missed his use of her first name, nor the effect his use of it had on her companion-help. It had brought the colour to her cheeks and an unusual brightness to her eyes.

When with a brief salute, Shaun had gone, Mrs. Driver said sharply, 'Don't make that mistake, Miss Hirst.'

Pretending innocence, Cara asked, 'What mistake, Mrs. Driver?'

'Of falling for my nephew. Those looks he gives a woman mean nothing, nothing at all. Except one thing, and that thing he will not—*will not*, you understand—she thumped her stick again, 'get from you. I'm no innocent old woman. I've been married. I know what goes on these days behind closed doors. And,' she added as an afterthought, 'his door closes often enough when he's got that red-haired girl in there, the owner's daughter, that Pendle girl.'

There was silence for the rest of the time, and Cara was glad. She had no desire to make idle conversation. Her imagination, which she had so underrated when discussing it with Shaun Sutherland, had become activated by an emotion which she refused to admit was jealousy, but which she could not deny came perilously near to it.

I must, she thought desperately, take Mrs. Driver's advice. I must not be drawn into Shaun Sutherland's powerful magnetic field. I will not let him find a pathway into my heart. I will not come when he calls. And I certainly won't go down to the lounge this evening. If he offered me a drink, I'd throw it in his face.

When Cara helped her employer into bed, Mrs. Driver said, as though she had been thinking about the matter all the while, 'I know my nephew. He'll try to get it from you, he'll do his damndest. He can't bear to feel there's a woman alive who can resist his attractions, and I can see with my own eyes he has a great many. Not to mention his fortune, which is large. But woman after woman, to her cost, has taken his approaches seriously, only to end up heartbroken and in misery and dishonour.'

If, when Cara switched off the light and said good night, she thought Mrs. Driver's language was just a little archaic, she nonetheless was forced to concede that what her employer had said was almost certainly right.

But, with a shrug and a sigh, she banned from her mind all pleasurable memories of Shaun's kiss on the sand dunes. It was, after all, only an 'experiment' on his part, wasn't it? Why should she worry about the effect

Shaun Sutherland's attractions had on her or any other woman? She had Steven, hadn't she?

It was four or five days before Cara saw Shaun Sutherland again. To her dismay she came to realise how much she missed him. Without his presence, the chance that somewhere, some time, she might see him, the hotel seemed empty.

She could not understand his absences. Where did he go? To London to see his publisher? Or, more likely, to visit his woman friend? Or did he stay in his room here in the hotel, writing hour after hour without a break?

This possibility she considered unlikely. Even though he might have had all his meals served in his suite of rooms, he would have needed a rest some time, if only to take a walk and get some fresh air.

'Behind closed doors.' The words came back to her as she pushed her employer along the corridor after an early evening walk. Shaun's door was closed. Had he been in his rooms all this time? If so, had he been alone? Had he, perhaps, taken his 'relaxation' in the company of the red-haired Valerie Pendle?

Miss Pendle had been on duty now and then at reception during Shaun's absence, but, Cara thought cynically, what did that mean? There was no one at the reception desk during the hours that counted so much in such a relationship, the hours of the night.

That the path her thoughts had been taking might have been in the right direction was confirmed when, during dinner, two people approached Shaun's own table—a man and a woman, Shaun Sutherland and the hotel owner's red-haired daughter.

'So he's back.' Mrs. Driver's comment was short and sharp, as was the look she gave the girl he was entertaining. As her nephew raised a hand to her and glanced slantingly at her companion-help, Mrs. Driver inclined her head and turned away. If she had meant to convey to her nephew her displeasure at his

openly flaunting his relationship with the daughter of the owner, it was plain by his deeply amused smile that his aunt's vexation had bounced off him like hailstones on concrete.

'Where—where has he been, Mrs. Driver?' Cara ventured, hoping earnestly that Mrs. Driver would say London or Scotland or the Far East ... Anywhere but shut away with Valerie Pendle in this building.

'I don't know. I never ask. He never tells me.'

Miserably, Cara lifted the soup spoon to her mouth. Earlier the taste had increased her appetite for the meal. Now, as she pushed aside the half-empty plate, she felt as though she could not take another mouthful.

When dinner was over there came the ritual of helping Mrs. Driver from her seat at the table into the wheelchair. Often guests would volunteer to help Cara in this task, but every time Mrs. Driver dismissed them with polite but decisive thanks, saying her companion-help knew best how to manage, that no one else could do it like her and how indispensable this girl was becoming in her very existence.

Mrs. Driver said the words so often that a thrust of fear, like the plunge of a bayonet, had Cara catching her breath and fighting for her life. It was almost, her unconscious mind whispered, as though Mrs. Driver was saying them with a purpose, like a hypnotist to a patient he had mesmerised. When you wake up, Mrs. Driver was silently urging, you will have no willpower of your own. You will carry out my instructions and my wishes without question, without hesitation, for the rest of my life, after which great benefits will come your way, and you will live what is left of *your* life alone and unloved, but in great comfort and unhappily ever after.

As Cara pushed her employer between the tables and through the swing doors, she wondered yet again, no matter in what glowing terms her employer praised her, how much longer she could go on. Her salary was accumulating in the bank, but the sum still seemed ridiculously small when it was compared with the target she and Steven had set themselves.

'You're looking tired, Miss Hirst.' The voice, startling her, came from behind, but it was familiar and she turned to look at the speaker. The deep red of the cord jacket he was wearing, against the dull gold of his shirt brought to life by the red of his tie, emphasised the darkness of his hair. The regularity of his features, his good physique, the powerful shoulders, all rolled together into the personality of this clever man had her heart thudding with pleasure and an extraordinary sense of anticipation—but anticipation of what?

His eyes, serious and enigmatic, did not tell her.

'Are you needing a holiday?'

At this his aunt came alive. She struggled to look over her shoulder. 'Holiday? Miss Hirst? I couldn't do without her, young man! Put no such ideas into her head.' She faced forward again. 'Push me, Miss Hirst. The lift is waiting.'

Shaun assisted them into the lift and the doors closed. Now Cara and Shaun were side by side. Her eyes were drawn up to his but his expression, although holding her gaze, told her little. He was looking at her so keenly she searched his face to discover a reason. When the lift came to a sudden stop she was thrown against him and his arm came out at once to steady her. Was it her imagination or did he pull her closer than was really necessary to restore her balance? Did his arm linger, or was it just that she did not want to move away?

'Come *along*, Miss Hirst. Have you gone to sleep?'

Cara came to her senses and grasped the handles of the wheelchair, propelling it into the corridor.

'She looks as though she needs some,' was her nephew's terse response.

'I'm sorry,' Cara said, inordinately disappointed at Shaun's dismissal of her appearance, 'if my looks fail to please you, but I'm here to work, not to satisfy any man's craving for feminine attractions.'

Coldly, Shaun held out his hand for the key to his aunt's door. Avoiding his eyes, Cara gave it to him. He unlocked the door and held it open while she pushed the wheelchair in.

'Holiday?' Mrs. Driver repeated, as if the idea rankled and had not left her thoughts. 'No, my companion-help cannot have a holiday. Instead, Miss Hirst,' she was facing them both now, 'I shall give you double salary for the three weeks you would otherwise have expected to go on leave.'

'But, Mrs. Driver, I--' Cara bit her lip. 'I must go home some time. I have--'

'A family to visit?' Mrs. Driver broke in.

'Well, my father—and,' she kept her eyes down, 'and friends.'

'Friends can do without you. Your father, if he wishes to see you, can come and stay here at my expense. And your mother--'

'Stepmother.'

'Stepmother, too, if she wants. So that's settled.'

'Aunt, it won't do.' Shaun's quiet voice drew his aunt's eyes upwards.

There was a strange look in them. Was it, Cara wondered, gazing at her employer, fear? Was the woman's dependence on her growing to such an extent that she was becoming a prisoner of her employer's invalid state and totally self-centred ways? Did Mrs. Driver think that by her promise of riches to come, she had bought her whole life?

'Miss Hirst is becoming as indispensable to me, Shaun, as the air I breathe.' She gazed up into her nephew's face as if pleading with him to understand. Since the day they had met, Cara had not known her employer reveal weakness of any kind until that moment. It seemed she was at last being forced to admit a vulnerability she had up to now denied, even to herself—a complete and defenceless reliance on the willingness of a paid servant to take her often abrupt, sometimes even rudely given orders.

Mrs. Driver's voice became a little husky as she held her nephew's eyes. 'Miss Hirst has something no one else I have employed has ever possessed, and that is kindness.' She cleared her throat. 'She—she doesn't hate me, Shaun, like all the others. I sensed it from the moment I saw her. I knew this was the girl I wanted to keep. Shaun,' her hand stretched out to him, shaking a little, and he took it in his, 'I can't spare her, not even for a holiday. I must have her with me, night and day. Otherwise, Shaun,' the eyes took on a frightened appeal, 'life would become unliveable as far as I'm concerned.'

Cara, standing beside Mrs. Driver, lifted her head and searched for Shaun's eyes. Help me! she was appealing. I can't dedicate the rest of my life to your aunt. I'm young, I have plans for the future, hazy, as yet and undefined, but plans, all the same. And there's Steve ...

Shaun dropped his aunt's hand and looked from one to the other. His eyes, as they dwelt on his aunt, held compassion. As they rested on Cara, they narrowed and his face became blank. His voice, as he spoke, held no expression. 'I never doubted from the moment I appointed her that Miss Hirst had *not* come to stay. Is that not so, Miss Hirst?'

What was she to say? He had heeded his aunt's appeal and rejected hers. But his aunt was his kinswoman; his mother, Mrs. Driver had told her, had been her sister. As she was his relative, her needs would naturally come before those of a mere employee.

Cara's eyes fell away from Shaun's hard gaze. She could not say 'yes', she could not even bring herself to nod. She could not lie again to this man for whom she had such respect, such admiration, such—such a deep emotion, new, stirring and infinitely disturbing.

'It—it would have been nice to have had a holiday sometimes,' was all she said, and knew that it was an admission of defeat, of acquiescence to Mrs. Driver's appeal—and Mrs. Driver's power.

Now Mrs. Driver's hand sought hers. 'You shall have such good times with me, my dear. We will go all over the world together. We shall go on cruises, you shall see the world, I promise. But with me, with me, do you understand?'

It was the need to escape, even if only for the space of a few minutes, that made Cara run from the hotel. She had settled Mrs. Driver in front of the television set and for the next hour or two, she was free.

And it was the need to make contact with someone outside the closed-in, padded-wall world in which she found herself that made her take the step of telephoning Steven. There-'was a public callbox in the hotel, but she decided it would be too risky to use. Half-way between the hotel and the village there was another callbox and as she approached it, she glanced over her shoulder to make sure she was not being followed.

The call to London did not take as long as she had feared. 'Steve!' Cara said, her eyes moist. 'It's great to hear your voice.'

'Stranger from my long-lost past!' Steve teased. 'How's the world treating you? Thanks for your letter, but I didn't like the postscript. Why can't I write or phone? Is the old girl your jailer or something?'

'Steve,' Cara placated, 'you know the rules Mrs. Driver made. No boy-friends, no make-up. If you could see me now,' she looked down at her uniform, 'I'm not sure you'd still love me!'

'Sweetheart,' said Steven, laughing, 'a man's not interested in what's on top. It's underneath that--'

'Steve, please!'

He must have heard the tears in her voice. 'Give it up, Cara. Get another teaching job. It won't pay so well, but what does it matter? We'll just save up slower, that's all. If we were together, we could--'

'Don't, Steve.' Cara knew what he was going to say. Anticipate marriage. They had had so many arguments in the past. It was her principles, Cara had decided, that had made her keep saying 'no'. It couldn't mean—it couldn't *possibly* mean—that she didn't love Steven enough to commit herself in such a way ... Could it?

'Mrs. Driver needs me, Steve. Only this evening she said how she likes me best of all the other companion-helps she's had. She doesn't want to lose me, she said, she doesn't want me to go ...'

'Cara, don't cry! You're hundreds of miles away. I can't even put my arms round you. Next opportunity, I'm coming up to see you, even if it means travelling there all night and back all the next night.'

'Steve, you can't, you mustn't! I've denied I've got a boy-friend, let alone one I'm intending to marry. To them up here you don't exist.'

'Them?'

Too late, Cara realised the slip she had made. When she had written to Steven, she hadn't mentioned her employer's nephew. 'Mrs. Driver's got a—a nephew.'

'Oh? How old? Fifties?' Was there a trace of stiffness in Steven's voice?

'Knock off twenty years.' A pause, then, 'Steve, he's a writer, a famous writer. He's—he's Shaun Sutherland.'

A long pause. 'Well, well, what do you know? I've seen his picture on the dust covers of his books.'

'Yes, yes,' she responded eagerly, 'he's just like his picture. Dark--'

'Tall *and* handsome? Plus a reputation for his fondness for women.'

Steven sounded sarcastic. Was he jealous? Cara smiled. Jealous of Shaun Sutherland, who could have any woman he wanted, who could mix with ease at any level of society, from the aristocracy with its titled women, to the poorer classes with its companion-helps? Now, Cara thought ruefully, who's being sarcastic?

They talked on for a while and Cara made Steven promise he would not even try to see her. 'It would be the end of everything,' she said.

Strange, Cara thought, as she pushed her way out of the phone box. When she had made the statement, she had not had her future with Steven in mind. She had had instead a picture of Shaun Sutherland's face.

Cara had not gone more than a few steps when she saw a man approaching. A tall man with dark hair and a suede jacket over slim-fitting pants. His hands were in his pockets, his whole attitude appeared casual. But his watchful eyes and slightly lowered head, like that of a bull considering whether to charge, put fear into Cara's heart and the readiness to run into her legs.

She swung to the kerb, looking right and left, waiting for a gap in the traffic. Once across the road, she could go along the shore, not back in the direction of the hotel, but away towards the village. She looked right again, agitatedly because the cars were taking such a long time to clear.

A hand gripped her arm. It was too late. The bull had not charged, it had merely quickened its pace without even stopping to paw the ground.

Cara turned sharply to look at her captor. Yes, the irritation was there in his face. He might not have charged, but it looked unmistakably as though he was going to toss her with his bad temper.

'Don't keep running away from me, Miss Hirst,' he said grimly, waiting for a clearance and pulling her across the road. 'One day I might really catch you, and when we parted, you'd know a few more facts about life and love than you do now.'

'I—I wasn't really running away, Mr. Sutherland. I only wanted to have a walk by the sea--'

'You were phoning someone,' he cut in. They were on the shore now, their shoes leaving lines of footprints behind them. He looked at her, lifting an eyebrow. 'A long-distance call, perhaps?'

'Well, yes, my—my-' Father, she had been going to say, but she could not allow the lie to pass her lips. 'A—a friend,' she finished weakly.

'Female, of course.' It was a statement, but the question was implied.

'It was a condition of my appointment, wasn't it,' she fenced, 'that I had no *male* friends?'

A hand on her shoulder stopped her. 'Let me look at you.' He turned her. It was dusk and the late April evening was growing chill. Now she faced him, looking up and waiting. She wondered at her own willingness to do his bidding, her unquestioning acceptance that he had the authority to dictate her movements, and she could not understand why. Would she put up no barriers, no matter what he asked her to do? If at any time he asked her to do something which went against her principles, would she still agree?

Fingers tilted her face and his brown eyes roved over her features. 'As I thought. No *female* friend could put that colour into your cheeks.'

She panicked. He was picking up too many clues, too many pointers to the truth. 'It's you,' she said, and stopped breathing. What had she said? What had she told this discerning man? A light—was it the rising moon?—seemed to shine behind his eyes, then it was gone. 'I mean, it's you asking me these questions. Doing this--' She pulled at the fingers which supported her chin, but could not dislodge them.

'You object to my touch?' His eyes were on her lips. 'You'd rather I kept my distance?'

Suppose she told him, 'I'd rather it was your mouth, not your eyes on my lips'? Then she remembered Steven and whispered, 'Please let me go, Mr. Sutherland.'

'My name is Shaun. I want to hear you say it.'

She panicked again. There was no word in the English language she would rather say. But she twisted away. 'Why, why? Why should I say it? What objective have you in mind? A sordid intrigue with your aunt's favourite

companion-help? And why? Because she's been sworn to spinsterhood for the rest of her employer's life? Because it would give you a kick to seduce her, and then watch her try to carry on as though she were her usual virginal, un-defiled self? Then write about it in one of your books?'

She had gone too far. She could tell by the set of his lips, the narrowing of his eyes.

'There was something in me that was growing sorry for you.'

Sorry for her? Was that all he could offer? Was that the only emotion she stirred in him? But what else could she expect when he saw her day after day in the same drab clothes, minus make-up and without the slightest hint of attraction beneath it all?

'I had intended showing you something which might brighten your life a little, to make you forget for a while the monotony of looking after my aunt. But after that delightful little tirade, I'm damned if I will.'

He turned and began striding over the dunes, up the sandhills and down the other side. Cara did not stop to think. She knew only that she could not bear to see him walking away from her. If he humiliated her by asking her to leave him alone, she did not care.

'Mr. Sutherland!' Even as her voice reached him, her feet were running after him, up the dunes and down, scuffing the sand and making it fly about. One of her shoelaces had come undone. She could feel it flapping and tapping as she ran, but she disregarded it. Reach him she would, however determinedly he was walking away from her. «

The moment she reached him she tripped—over the untied shoelace. She landed at his feet, face down, her fingers making gripping, useless trails in the sand. So the humiliation had been forced on her, not by him but by her own foolish action.

The hopelessness of it hit her as suddenly as the ground had come towards her. The trapped sensation every time Mrs. Driver said how dependent upon

her she was growing, the attempts to escape by writing and phoning Steven who was her lifeline to the world she used to know.

The feminine attraction, the admiring looks, her natural gaiety, had gone for ever. There was a lifetime before her of dancing attendance on a demanding semi-invalid whose hold on her was more subtle than money. It was, rather, a deep-seated, emotional need which only the hardest of hearts could ignore.

Cara did not attempt to rise, but lay there hiding the tears and trying to suppress the sobs, but they shook her body. There was no attempt by Shaun to comfort her. She did not even know whether he had stopped. Her misery deafened her to all sound but her own stumbling heartbeats.

It took some time for her to cry herself out. Then she lay spent, her cheek turned to the sand. It clung to her skin and her hair, but offered, too, a pillow of softness on which to rest her throbbing head.

'Cara?' Shaun crouched beside her, his dark head outlined against the pearl-white of a moon-washed sky. He turned her and lifted her until she was resting across his knees and cradled in his arms. She looked up at him, the moonlight catching at her features one by one. It was a dream world she was in, there in his arms and in that world anything was possible. So when his lips moved down and touched all over her face, she was not surprised.

'I'm kissing away the moon shadows,' he whispered. Then his eyes, their expression hidden by the darkening backdrop of sky meeting sea, came to rest on her lips. It was as though he could not resist the temptation. It seemed he did not even try.

The kiss he took was gentle, but one was plainly not enough. He had to have two and then another. She stirred in her dream world, coming back to life. The kisses were awakening her in ways that could not, could never, with this man, be fulfilled. He was sorry for her, wasn't he? He had told her so just now. 'Please, *please*, Mr.--'

'Say Shaun.'

'Please, Shaun ..She said the name lightly, quickly on an indrawn breath. He had had his way. She had spoken his name.

Satisfied, he stood, lifting her with him. 'Keep it that I way.' His hand brushed the sand from her hair, moving softly over her cheek until the golden grains fell away, leaving the skin smooth again.

She shook her head in response to his command.

'Why not?' he queried. 'If I give you permission to use my first name--'

'It's impossible. The barriers between us would be broken.'

'Damn the barriers!'

'I—I meant what I said earlier, Mr. Sutherland. I'd never agree to a clandestine--'

His hand clamped on her wrist and he jerked her beside him cruelly, pulling her after him across the sand. They walked silently and Cara wondered where he was taking her. They were making for the road, the same road she had walked along the evening she found her way to the castle, the evening he had discovered her on the doorstep and run after her.

Their footsteps rang on the pavement and the silence between them persisted until Cara said, 'Are you—are you going to show me the thing you spoke about before I—before I--'

'Before you shouted at me like an acid-tongued shrew? Yes, I've relented—a little.'

'Because you're sorry for me?' Why, oh, why did she have to remind him of it?

It took some time for him to reply. 'I'm sorry for you, yes, in more ways than one.' She waited for him to explain, but he did not do so.

They were on the road to Wildsea Castle, climbing now as the gradient increased. With her free hand she pointed. 'Are we going there?'

'We are.'

'But it's closed, isn't it? How can we get in?'

'The same way as I got in last time, through the door which was opened by the housekeeper.' He slanted a smile at her. 'And when I left, I found an elusive wraith on the doorstep.'

'Do you know the owner, Mr. Sutherland?'

He looked at her quickly, started to say, 'Don't call me--' but changed his mind. 'Yes, I know the owner.'

'Which is why you're also allowed to visit Wildsea Islands whenever you like?'

He inclined his head. So he knew the owner so well that even in his absence he had right of entry.

As they approached, the building, even in the darkness, loomed large and intimidating. They climbed the steps and stopped outside the great wooden door. As they waited for their knock to be answered, there was in the distance the sound of waves breaking against the rocks.

The building was in darkness and Cara wondered if their walk had been in vain. Nervously her hands pushed at her hair. It was long enough now to curl round her cheeks, although it would take a long time to reach the length it* had been before she had been ordered to shorten it.

'You'll have to have it cut again soon.'

She swung to face him. 'Your aunt hasn't mentioned it.' Then, in the light of the moon, she caught his taunting smile.

'Suppose I remind her?'

'You wouldn't!'

'Wouldn't I?' He reached out and pulled her closer, taking up two handfuls of hair and looking down into her face 'Yes,' his eyes gleamed, 'that accentuates the plainness.' Again, unaccountably—was it to soften his harsh words?—his mouth seemed to move towards hers, but she twisted and writhed until she was free of him. 'Calling me plain, and then kissing it better! What do you think a woman is made of? Even if a woman is plain, don't you know how much it hurts her to be told so?'

'So it hurts you if I call you plain?'

Did it hurt? He might as well have slapped her across the face. But the pain from that would have passed off. The wound his words had inflicted would eat into her for an infinity of time.

He turned to the great door again and rapped harder.

'It's these clothes.' She tugged viciously at the heavy navy blue jacket, the shapeless white blouse. 'I hate them! One day I'll--' She checked herself and looked at him apprehensively. When would that door be opened?

'You could lose your job, Miss Hirst, if at any time you abandoned your uniform.' He spoke softly, but beneath the softness was a warning.

'There can't be anyone in,' she said, desperate now. The man was tormenting her with his tenderness intermixed with a hint of cruelty.

'There's always someone in. The housekeeper is probably busy in some part of the house. She has a great deal to look after.'

'You seem to know a lot about the place.'

He ignored her question. At last there were sounds of bolts being drawn, a key being turned and hinges creaking as the door moved inwards.

'Come in, Mr. Sutherland.' The woman, short in stature, her face and body rotund in proportion, smiled a welcome. She seemed to have been expecting

him. 'Have I kept you waiting? I was upstairs.' She looked enquiringly at Cara.

Shaun introduced them. 'Mrs. Stapleton, this is Cara Hirst, my aunt's latest companion-help. Cara,' carelessly though he said her name, it tugged at her heart, 'this is the housekeeper.'

They shook hands and Cara ventured, 'You live here alone, Mrs. Stapleton?'

The woman nodded, smiling. 'Alone and lonely.' To Shaun, 'I could do with some company, Mr. Sutherland.'

He laughed and cupped his hand round Cara's elbow. Did she have to jump like that every time he touched her? 'Never mind, I have no doubt your employer will be back soon from his—travels, wasn't it?'

She gave him a quick look, frowned and then smiled. 'He's a restless soul, Mr. Sutherland. He could do with settling down.'

Again Shaun laughed. 'And provide you with some company?'

'And some work.'

Shaun smiled and tightened his hold on Cara. 'Come, my dear Miss Hirst, in the owner's absence, I'll show you round. Your employer wouldn't object, Mrs. Stapleton?'

For a moment she hesitated, then smiled. 'Not at all, Mr. Sutherland. You have the run of the place, you know that.'

Cara felt Mrs. Stapleton's eyes on them as they left her, puzzled eyes—and well they might be, Cara thought, because now Shaun's arm was across her shoulders. His other was lifted to the ceiling, pointing out the stonework. Around them, on pedestals, were statues. Over a doorway topped by a great stone arch was a pair of cupids, supporting the family coat of arms.

From end to end, the hall was enormous and, Cara felt, put insignificant creatures like companion-helps firmly in their places. You are, it told her,

with supreme indifference, of microscopic importance to this place. You will look round, admire, long to be part of it and go away, never to return. Your coming and your going will not leave even a ripple on the ancient, unruffled waters of this family.

Shaun looked at his watch. 'A lightning tour, I'm afraid. According to my calculations, my aunt will be requiring your services soon.'

Cara was disappointed, but had to agree. She must not be late again, but she would have loved to have seen all of this great building, every room, every corner, every secret place. No wonder Shaun Sutherland had sought his friend's permission to come here whenever he pleased.

There was the green drawing-room on which, when Shaun flicked a switch, the centre crystal chandelier threw light from its imitation candles over every piece of furniture. From there they passed to the saloon, with its ancient carpet, the writing-room with its polished antique tables and tapestry-covered chairs.

'It's beautiful,' she said, gazing up at Shaun, 'beyond words.'

He smiled at her pleasure and they moved on.

Everywhere there were portraits, gazing blankly into the distance or a little knowingly, at whoever happened to be passing by. A painting of a young man caught Cara's attention. He was dressed in clothes in the style of two centuries before and had a look of careless wildness about him.

'The proverbial black sheep,' Shaun murmured, as he propelled her away. 'Every family has one.'

Cara resisted his impelling hand and strained to look back at the portrait. 'I'm sure I've seen him before.'

This time Shaun succeeded in detaching her from the picture. 'In your dreams, no doubt. Isn't that where all young women see a man of that kind? He had a reputation for being an incredibly good lover. Whether that reputation was or was not in fact correct,' Shaun added drily, 'we shall never

know, because the ladies he must have loved—reputedly many—are no longer with us.' He changed his tone. 'Come along, Miss Hirst. If I don't get you back to my aunt on time, not only will she dismiss her admirable companion-help, she will dismiss her nephew, too!'

Mrs. Stapleton met them in the hall. 'Was everything satisfactory, Mr. Sutherland?'

'Perfectly, thank you, Mrs. Stapleton. You're doing excellently in your employer's absence.'

They exchanged smiles. 'I removed all the dust covers as you instructed me to, Mr.--' She stopped, gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

Shaun's whole attitude changed. He stiffened, thanked the housekeeper briefly and grasped Cara's wrist. 'We must hurry.' He pulled her through the entrance door, down the steps and into the drive.

There she stopped, and despite his curt instructions to her to follow him, stayed rooted to the spot. Impatiently he turned and in the light of the full moon, she stared at him.

'Now I know,' she breathed, 'where I've seen the face of the man in that portrait. In you. He's a descendant of yours, isn't he? And *you* are the owner of Wildsea Castle!'

CHAPTER SIX

Lifelessly Cara stared out of the hotel window. Mrs. Driver was resting. It was mid-afternoon. For some days there had been no sign of Shaun Sutherland. He seemed to have disappeared again without trace. Was he living at the castle now?

Cara had tried, by careful questioning, to persuade the answer out of her employer, but Mrs. Driver was unconcerned about her nephew's whereabouts.

'He comes and goes as he pleases. He's a free agent. With work like his, to a certain extent, he has to be. Sometimes he's away for months. Sometimes he lives abroad and writes an entire book there. I'm surprised he hasn't gone sooner. The book he's working on at the moment must have a home background, otherwise he would have been up and away long ago.'

Now Cara watched the restless sea rising and falling as far as the grey horizon. The islands, named after the castle, stood out clearly, hinting at rain to come. Was he there, perhaps? He had every right, she knew now, as the owner of them.

She thought back to the evening she had discovered the identity of the owner of Wildsea Castle. They had walked back to the hotel and he had not spoken a word. It was she who had ranted, directing a tirade at him that he did not even try to halt. Instead, he treated it with an icy indifference.

'Why didn't you tell me?' she had raged. 'Why did you keep pretending? Did you think that your aunt's poverty-stricken companion-help might get ideas about you because you'd kissed her a few times? Did you think I'd try to trick you into marriage with me?' Even as she had spoken the words, she had known how stupid they were. Not in her craziest dreams could she imagine any woman tricking a man as ruthless and experienced as he was into marriage!

At her foolish words he had merely given her a cold, reducing glance. In self-defence she had stormed, 'What sensible woman would want to tie herself for life to a descendant of that man in the portrait, with his

womanising reputation? Judging by what your aunt says, anyway,' she had blundered on, goaded by his lack of response to her insults, 'you follow in his footsteps!'

If only he had spoken, defended himself, told her to keep quiet! If only he had threatened her with something, anything, dismissal even, if she did not stop. But he had let the words flow childishly from her wayward lips as if he had wanted her to indict herself by her uncontrolled and intolerable behaviour. If that had been his intention, she thought ruefully, he couldn't have chosen a better way.

She turned from the window, wondering when Mrs. Driver would wake. Even talking to her, reading out passages from the newspaper or from her current library book was preferable to this aimless wandering. Perhaps, she thought, a breath of air would revive her flagging spirits. With her jacket collar turned up and her hands in her pockets, she braved the gale which roared across the North Sea.

It caught at her hair as soon as she stepped outside, wrapped her skirt about her and constricted temporarily the movement of her legs. When she had adjusted to the elements, she turned instinctively towards the castle, staying away from the shore because the tide was in and the waves broke with ferocity against the sands. All the same, the spray fountained now and then across the road, whipping over her cheeks. After walking a short distance, she stopped. It was no good, the weather had defeated her.

The castle stood high on its rock, as remote and unapproachable as its owner. It drew her powerfully, so that she had physically to restrain herself from continuing towards it. Now she had seen some of the beauties of the interior, it was no longer simply a great, rather daunting building. For Cara, it had come to life, held meaning and a message, one which she could not as yet unravel from its turrets and spires.

With a sigh, she turned her back on it and made for the hotel. Even in mid-May, the heating which greeted her as she pushed through the swing doors was welcome. As she approached the stairs, passing reception, she turned down the collar of her jacket. She glanced towards the desk, but there was no one on duty. She moved a few paces and stopped.

A man stood with his back to her, sorting through a pile of-mail. He was a tall man with dark hair curling slightly above his collar. At the sight of the broad shoulders, the strong solidity of him as against the elusive ^substantiality he had assumed in her dreams, Cara experienced such a rush of joy she hardly knew how to contain it. If he noticed her now, there would be no hiding it from him, so whatever happened she must not attract his attention. Her footsteps were obediently soft as she tiptoed past and rested a hand on the curving banisters.

'Don't go, Miss Hirst.'

How had he known who she was? He had not looked. It could have been any hotel guest passing behind him. He followed up his words with a quick, arresting look over his shoulder. 'Come here.'

Now she must hide the elation his return had infused into her body, but how, she did not know. Perversely her eyes shone, contrarily her lips parted in an unbelieving smile. Her delight was spilling over. Disobediently the words formed and were spoken.

'Mr. Sutherland, you're back!' She had no need to say more, her face said it for her. But her welcome received a cold response. She frowned. This man's silences were worse than another's fury. It was plain he had not forgiven her for her outburst before he went away.

How could she make things right between them? Apologise, but more abjectly this time, because her words had been more abusive? Anything to get that icy look to melt, that tight-lipped mouth to relax.

'Mr. Sutherland, I'm sorry--'

'Do you never collect your mail?' The tone was curt, the question astonishing.

'Mail?' She shook her head. 'No one writes to me.'

'Don't they?' He took a handful of envelopes, holding them up. 'Four,' he looked at them, 'all in the same writing, all bearing a London postmark and,'

he peered at the date stamps, 'posted at intervals of two days. Someone, Miss Hirst, has been writing to you every other day for a week. So nobody ever writes to you?'

It was not so much the sarcasm that made her cheeks burn, it was the possible identity of the writer of those letters. She held out her hand, but he did not immediately give them to her. 'Why didn't you collect them?'

'I told you, it never occurred to me that I'd get any letters.'

'You have a faithful correspondent, Miss Hirst. Take his letters, they're yours.'

Gladly she took them, then, startled, she looked at him. 'How do you know the writer's male? How do you know it's not a woman?'

That's a man's writing, no doubt about it. Sprawling, extrovert yet understandable. A teaching colleague of yours from the past?'

She looked down at the envelopes he had passed to her and had no difficulty at all in recognising Steven's writing. 'But,' she blurted out, 'I told him--'

Aghast, she looked at Shaun Sutherland.

'Him?' The eyebrows lifted again. 'So I was right.'

'My--' She licked her lips. 'My father. I—I told him not to put himself out. He—he--' Quickly she had to invent a tale. 'He was worried about me, about the climate up here in the north, about how—how it would affect my health.'

His eyes narrowed. 'I won't say it, Miss Hirst. I'll think it.'

'Think what, Mr. Sutherland?' Her voice was small, her eyes nervous.

'That you invent almost as expertly as I do.'

He turned his back on her and continued sorting through his mail.

Sitting on her bed, Cara read Steven's letters. 'I was worried about you,' he said, 'after your phone call. You sounded low, so I thought a few pages from me would cheer you up. I know you said don't write, but they can't keep you in the equivalent of solitary confinement, especially from me. No phone calls, okay, but writing's different.' The other letters contained gossip about their teaching colleagues, about the new members of staff and comments on the attractions or lack of them of the new women teachers he had met in the staff room.

She read them through, every word, savouring the loving phrases at the end of each one. Steve loved her. He knew about the warmth she possessed and the need, like any woman to be admired and appreciated.

Then, with a sigh, she put them in a drawer. It still nettled her that her employer's nephew had to be the one to discover them awaiting collection. Why, she reproached herself, had she not looked, just as a precaution, knowing Steven's impulsive ways?

Shaun did not appear for dinner. After making his presence known to his aunt, he had disappeared into his suite of rooms. All the time he had been speaking to his aunt, Cara had stood, hands clasped in front of her, completely ignored. She had never felt so insignificant, so servant-like in her life before.

Notice me for what I am, her intellect had cried out. I have a brain, I have a career to return to, if I could find any school who would have me. Some head teacher somewhere might be so short of staff he would accept me on my qualifications and overlook my inability to control a class of children. To you I may be just an empty-headed employee, capable only of pushing a semi-invalid about.

I'm a person in my own right, she wanted to shout ... but they had carried on talking as if she were deaf, as if she could not understand a word of what they were saying.

Shaun Sutherland knew exactly what he was doing. That was obvious from the gleam in his eyes as he had glanced her way before leaving them. Her expression must have given away her feelings, because he smiled, but it was

tight, humourless and angry. There was no doubt that, in his eyes, her sins were piling up—her intolerable rudeness, the letters he had found; her defiance in his presence when she should all the time show respect and deference.

After dinner, Cara settled Mrs. Driver in her lounge, putting within reach her stick, a box of chocolates and a book, should she require it. 'I can "switch off" the television set without actually switching it off, my dear,' she had once said.

Cara wandered aimlessly down the stairs. The fact that Shaun Sutherland was somewhere on the premises again made her restless. It was the music that drew her past the residents' main lounge to a door which stood open. Inside the room there was, over the music, the sound of young voices raised in laughter. It seemed there was a party in progress, which was part discotheque, part formal dancing.

Cara stared at the girls in their jeans and shirts, their long dresses and their swinging skirts. With all her being she longed to be in that room with those young people, throwing off the restraints that had been heaped upon her by the impossible demands of her employer.

'Like you, I'm young,' she wanted to shout over the sound of the music, 'I want to dance and laugh and throw aside my duties and responsibilities, if only for an hour or two.

'Not your idea of enjoyment, Miss Hirst?' Shaun Sutherland lounged, one hand in pocket, one against the door frame. His smile mocked; it was not offered in friendship.

How old did he think she was? As old as her uniform made her look? Disappointment, bitterness at her lot made her reckless. 'Of *course* it is,' she snapped. 'I'm young, they're young. I feel the same as they do. But you wouldn't know, wouldn't remember ..

A quick anger thrust out the lazy mockery. 'So I'm too old? I'm past it?' He gripped her arm and tugged her into the darkened room. A young man seated behind a table rose at their entrance. Shaun talked to him, but the music was

so loud, Cara could not hear their conversation. The young man beamed, put out his hand and shook Shaun's. 'Happy to meet you, Mr. Sutherland.' Cara heard the words above the noise. Then he motioned them in. So it seemed that Shaun had used his name, his fame, to gain admittance to a private party.

It was at that point that Cara's common sense sprang to life. 'I can't go in there,' she said, raising her voice so that he could hear. 'In this,' she pulled at the sleeve of her jacket, 'and this,' with disgusted fingers she plucked at her skirt, 'I wouldn't be seen dead amongst them,' indicating the smiling, swaying crowd with a nod of the head.

'Take this off.' Her jacket was peeled from her back and thrown on a chair. 'Forget your skirt. Now, do the same thing to your blouse as you did that day I found you on the sands.'

Unbutton it, let the neckline plunge? She looked up at him. Was it for her sake he was encouraging her to break the rules, or his own?

'You want to tell your aunt about me. Is that why you're pressurising me to be indiscreet, so that you can get me thrown out of my job?'

'How indiscreet you are, Miss Hirst,' he drawled, 'depends solely on the limits you set upon your own behaviour. I don't usually have to *encourage* a woman to be, as you put it, "indiscreet". They just seem to act that way naturally when I'm around. I'm not boasting, I'm telling you the truth. I, being male and as dissolute, on occasion, as the rest of diem, rarely turn down an offer. And as for getting you thrown out of your job,' his eyes sparked with anger, 'if you don't keep those unbelievably sweet-looking hps of yours from mouthing insults and abuse at me, I shall not only have you thrown out of your job, I shall make damned sure, by using my status and position, that you never get a post as companion-help or any other sort of "help" again. Now, do as I tell you and join in the fun. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?'

'Not with you, thanks,' she responded, her eyes blazing.

She found herself pushed to a corner of the room and down on to a chair. A tall figure bent over her, fingers found the buttons of her blouse and one by one unfastened them, until the neckline was as revealing as a low-cut dress. Glittering eyes narrowed, surveying the effect. 'That's better, much better,' Shaun Sutherland said. 'Now roll up your sleeves.'

Cara had no choice but to obey. 'Better still,' said Shaun. 'Since we can't remove your skirt and remain decent, we'll let that go. One more thing.' He crouched down and before Cara could guess what he was about, he had unlaced her shoes, removed them and pushed them under the chair. 'Now,' he said, 'we can get down to business. Follow me.'

He hauled her behind him on to the dance floor and pulled her into his arms. The music was in a romantic mood and coloured lights, like a moving rainbow, played over the dancers. She danced on her toes, but even so came only just above Shaun's shoulder. Why is he holding me so close? she thought bemusedly. If he presses me any closer he'll feel the beating of my heart against his own. Her shoeless feet slipped on the wooden floor and his arm around her tightened, steadying and strong.

'Cara?' His voice was a murmur and shyly she lifted her eyes to his. He was smiling. 'Now you're scarlet, now you're green. Blue now, and gold. A golden girl called Cara Hirst.' He was caressing her with his words, his eyes were kissing her face. If he looked like that at a girl who meant nothing to him, how would he look if he was holding in his arms the woman he loved?

That was something, she told herself severely, turning her head away, that she would never know. 'How can you talk so poetically about a plain, unattractive companion- help? Unless,' she glanced up at him, 'you were being sarcastic?'

He lifted a shoulder, still smiling. 'Take it how you like. If you want to think I'm being sincere, then think it. If you prefer to put a sarcastic interpretation on what I said, go ahead.'

His careless attitude was causing her more pain than he would ever know.

'Don't look so sad, Cara Hirst. I got us invited to a party--'

'Gate-crashed, you mean.'

His fingers pressed momentarily against her mouth and she only just restrained herself from kissing them. 'Ah, no. I asked permission—using my verbal visiting card, I do admit.'

'Does that happen everywhere? You only have to mention who you are and the whole world throws open its doors for you to enter?' She smiled a little impishly.

'That's largely true, yes. The whole world—and, as the saying goes, sometimes even his wife.' Now it was he who was provoking.

She stiffened and her smile died out. *Wives* chase you? Wives of other men?

'Now you're prying into my personal life.'

The music stopped and Cara made to return to the seats, but his hand easily prevented her. His fingers closed round hers so tightly she thought the bones would crack. 'Come back here.'

She came, standing before him, looking into his eyes, mesmerised by them. Their hands were linked, they were alone in a crowded room. The music began again and he drew her to him, close, closer even than before. Their steps matched faultlessly, their bodies moved in perfect unison. Somehow she had to break the contact.

She was becoming so tied up with this man that if she did not bring her willpower into play before it was too late, she would prove to be her own worst enemy. Before she died a living death—parting with Shaun Sutherland while loving him would, she knew, be just that—she must inject some poison into their relationship and stand aside and watch it wither and die.

'You—you have a girl-friend?' she forced out.

A moment's pause, then, 'I have.'

'Is it—is it Valerie Pendle?'

There was another silence, then he smiled down at her, but somehow his eyes were not touched. 'I shall answer that one question, but no more. Valerie Pendle is—a friend of mine. But no, it's not Valerie Pendle. Now quit your self-imposed role of prosecuting counsel and return to your rather insignificant real-life role of Mrs. Flora Driver's employee.'

That was too much! '*You* brought me to this party, *you* insisted on undoing my blouse and removing my shoes.' She jerked from him but found herself up against steel. He would not let her go.

She was so close now it was difficult to raise her head, so she rested her cheek against his chest. It felt oddly comfortable there.

'You allowed me to,' he murmured. 'You had it within your power to say "no". Whenever a woman does, I make it my policy always to stop, at once.'

'How can you blame me?' she cried. 'How--?'

His lips swooped, settling on hers with a mixture of force and persuasion, a heady, irresistible mixture. Their feet slowed to a standstill. They had danced into a corner. The kiss went on. When he let her go she could not have stood without support. 'Shaun,' she whispered, 'someone will see us.'

Hard fingers pulled her face up again. 'Does it matter? We're strangers to them. They've never seen us before, never will again. Now, Cara Hirst, I so liked the taste of that kiss, I want another. Give,' he murmured, 'give, my sweet.'

So she gave, and afterwards her legs almost gave way. They stood gazing into each other's eyes. A spotlight played over them. The guests around them stared.

Cara, apprehensive now, looked around. 'They're guessing who you are, Shaun.'

'It upsets you?'

'Your aunt will hear--'

'Yes, she will. I intend her to.' Her hand, which he had not released, was gripped even tighter, her arm was almost jerked from its socket as he pulled her behind him to the exit. They were through it, across the reception hall—the desk was unattended, no Valerie Pendle—and climbing the stairs. He moved so fast, Cara protested. 'My coat, my shoes, Shaun.'

'I'll collect them later. No one will take them, they wouldn't be seen dead ...'

He burst into his aunt's lounge. Mrs. Driver was deep in a book, although the television was still on. She had 'switched it off', as she had claimed to be able to do, without pressing the button.

'Aunt,' Shaun said, 'Cara Hirst at your service. Look at her, look closely. I've produced a woman by my own hands. And lips.' He smiled into Cara's uncomprehending eyes. He had *told* his aunt—everything. He moved a pace nearer to Cara, tipping her face to his. 'What's more, she let me.'

Mrs. Driver's face was working, her cheeks were scarlet. She spat out, 'Turn that thing off, Miss Hirst.' She indicated the television set. Shaun, not Cara, obliged.

She could hardly talk for anger. 'I told you—I gave strict instructions, that never, *never* were you to remove your uniform and dress in everyday clothes.'

'It—it *is* my uniform, Mrs. Driver. It's just that Shaun--' She coloured deeply. 'M-Mr. Sutherland—I mean *I* opened the neck a little--'

'It's disgusting!' Mrs. Driver's eyes moved down. 'Your shoes— they've gone.' Now her cheeks were livid. 'Have you let him *seduce* you, girl?'

Cara's hand went to her throat, moving down to cover the bareness below. She felt indecent, undressed—and cheap. His words came back. 'You could have stopped me.'

She turned and ran, through Mrs. Driver's bedroom, across it and into her own. The door slammed and she leant against it, fighting for breath, for her lost dignity and for her self-respect.

The evening ritual of putting Mrs. Driver to bed was conducted in a strained and painful silence. At the moment Cara bent to tuck in the bedclothes before turning out the light, Mrs. Driver's hand found Cara's.

'Miss Hirst,' Mrs. Driver's voice sounded dry and feeble, 'listen to me, my dear. I beg of you,' her eyes looked earnestly into Cara's, 'don't allow yourself to become ensnared by my nephew's charms. I know he has many, everything a young girl might dream about, but dreams are romantic nonsense. My nephew is not young and foolish, an untried man. He knows the ways of the world, and of women. If you become emotionally caught up with him, you will only be leaving yourself open to the heartbreak and unhappiness suffered by all the other women who have sought—and often gained—his attention.'

A spasm of movement passed through Cara's arm. Mrs. Driver felt it and her frail fingers pressed harder. Cara wanted to cover her ears to keep out the truth her employer was speaking. It's too late, she wanted to cry, my feelings are already deeply committed.

But Mrs. Driver was saying, 'His attention, but not his love, Miss Hirst. He himself has said within your hearing that he might let a woman *think* she has trapped him into marriage, but that is as far as it ever goes. He holds himself aloof. He looks at life—at love itself—objectively, never becoming involved. He's a writer, after all, and most writers are observers. He lets life run through his mind like sand through the fingers. He uses in his writing what he wants of what he sees and hears, then brushes away the remainder, leaving himself free of it.'

Again Cara tried to move away, but her hand was still clasped. 'Don't let him use you in this fashion, only to cast you aside like the others. Because you would have to leave, and I need you too much, Miss Hirst, I need you too much for that!'

At last Cara's hand was released. She managed a smile at the pain-lined face looking so earnestly up at her. To show that she understood all that Mrs. Driver had been saying Cara forced herself to nod. But she could not speak. Not in any way could she commit herself with false promises.

In her own room, she covered her face with her hands. A closing in, a tying down, a hunted, cornered feeling overcame her. Would she never get away from this strange woman, one moment imperious and unsparing beyond belief, the next a pleading, defenceless old lady? How could she have let herself become so involved in Mrs. Flora Driver's life, so essential to her well-being?

Something inside Cara's mind started crying out for attention—the need to get out, get free and get away. But from whom? Mrs. Driver, or her nephew? From both was the answer and it resounded in her brain like the tolling of a bell.

She took her troubles to bed, hoping that an early night would release her from her problems. On the point of slipping into sleep, she was awakened by a tap at the door. Alert at once, she listened. Which door? But it could only be the outer door. Mrs. Driver could not move from the bed without assistance. It must, she thought, be a member of the hotel staff returning her clothes.

It was Shaun Sutherland. Over his arm was her jacket, in his hand her shoes. He did not hold them out to her and go, because it seemed his mind was on other things. On Cara, on the explosion of femininity beneath the soft, light nightdress, the tousled hair, the flushed cheeks and sleep-wide eyes. It was the first time he had seen her as she really was and, man-like, he took the opportunity to fill in the hitherto missing, intriguing details.

She held out her hands for the clothes, but he walked into the room, pushing the door shut with his shoulder. Cara wrapped her arms about her body, an ostrich-like gesture intended to hide from him what she had so thoughtlessly forgotten to cover with a robe.

A soft flush arose from the misty pink nightgown and judging by his smile, it pleased him. But he chose to be sarcastic, tutting and saying, 'No uniform,

Miss Hirst? Always you must wear your uniform. Wasn't that part of the deal?'

She snatched the jacket from him and swung it round her shoulders, but he laughed so loudly she became terrified that he would waken her employer. 'Will you remove yourself from my room, Mr. Sutherland?' she blurted out.

But she could not ruffle his self-assurance. He dropped her shoes to the floor and moved towards her. She backed away. She must not let him touch her now!

His shirt was open almost to the last button and hung loose from his trousers. There was a glimpse of the shadow of hair which in its colour matched the darkness of the hair on his head. There was about him a lithe, untamed air she had not noticed before. But then she had never seen him in such intimate circumstances. His attractiveness, vulnerable as she was, set her senses reeling, an attractiveness which tormented her like food just out of the reach of a tethered, starving dog.

Without warning, he reached out, his hand catching her upper arms and pulling her to him. The jacket, at his touch, fell to the floor. His fingers massaged her flesh, expertly, seductively, moving to her shoulders, her throat and cupping her face.

'You're beautiful, Cara,' he murmured. 'I guessed that this was how you would be.' His mouth, that hard, sarcastic mouth, moved slowly, purposefully, towards hers, found its quarry and proceeded to make it his own. That cry for freedom rang out again inside her. She was trapped by the aunt, she would not be trapped by the nephew.

She pulled at his arms, pushed at his chest and tore herself away. 'Get out of my room!' Each word was clear and emphasised.

Now his eyes, like his lips, grew hard. 'Where's the sweet, compliant creature I was dancing with downstairs? Where are the come-on signs she was sending out to me. Where's the smiling, willing girl I held in my arms?'

'She's gone, Mr. Sutherland, and as far as you're concerned, gone for ever. After what your aunt's been telling me about you, I'll never trust you again.'

He slitted his eyes, letting them roam insultingly over her. 'You believed her?'

'I had no alternative. I've seen how you've behaved with me so--' Her voice, which had been steady only by a great effort of will, threatened to break, so she stopped. Did she really believe this man would say, But you're different. Unlike all the other women I've known, I love you ...?

'And I,' he bit out, 'have seen how *you* have behaved with *me*. I could tell my aunt a few things about you which would shock her so much you would be dismissed on the spot. Those letters you received, that phone call you made, not to mention,' his eyes strayed indolently again, 'other things.'

He had won, he had reduced her to a pleading, frightened creature. 'Mr. Sutherland, please don't tell your aunt.' She went towards him, resting her hand on his arm. 'Whatever it is you know about me, say nothing ...' Why was she imploring him, begging him, abasing herself? For Steven's sake, for the future together? Or because it was becoming imperative that her life and Shaun Sutherland's should not divide and part, never to come together again?

He gripped her arm and threw it away. There was no mistaking his contempt. 'What is it that's bothering you?' he sneered. 'If I got you fired, you would have to say goodbye to that juicy carrot of my aunt's fortune she keeps waving in front of your eyes. What's your game? To stay on until my aunt dies, but carry on an undercover affair so that you don't miss out on the "good" things in life while waiting for that money to fall into your hands?'

She paled. She had not realised he thought so badly of her.

He came towards her, but stopped a pace or two away. 'Above all things I respect and admire honesty, Miss Hirst. I'm becoming more and more convinced that it's the last thing I shall ever get from you!'

He slammed the door, leaving her staring after him.

'Pack my cases, Miss Hirst,' Mrs. Driver instructed next morning. 'And yours. We're moving out.'

Cara was stunned. Were they going abroad, as Mrs. Driver had once promised?

'Don't stand there staring, girl. You have a lot to do.'

'But—but where are we going, Mrs. Driver?'

'Where? To my nephew's house, where else?'

'To—to Wildsea Castle? To *live* there?'

'For as long as he allows us to stay. Have you any objection to living there?'

'None at all, except—it's so big.' And empty, she might have added, and *unlived* in. And even unloved? Why had the owner decided to open it up again?

'He's taking on extra staff,' Mrs. Driver said, 'which will please the housekeeper.'

'I could do with some company,' Mrs. Stapleton had said. She had added other things which Cara could not remember. But at the time she had not known the owner was standing beside her. If she had, she would have taken more notice of what the housekeeper was saying about him.

Cara opened Mrs. Driver's wardrobe doors and surveyed the clothes on the rails. Which should she pack first? 'What made him decide to do it, Mrs. Driver?' Was she sounding as casual as she hoped?

'Who knows what motivates my nephew? I gave up that guessing game long ago.'

'Perhaps,' Cara breathed deeply and it cost her a great deal to continue, 'perhaps he's intending to marry. He hinted to me that he had a girl-friend--'

'He has many. He could mean Miss Pendle, daughter of the owner of this hotel.'

'No, someone else, he said.'

'Ah, then he means Ginni, Ginni Ravenga.'

'The actress?' Cara congratulated herself on how well she was hiding her dismay.

'Actress-cum-playwright. Sometimes she and Shaun collaborate, although it's my belief he writes the lot and lets her take some of the credit.'

'She's beautiful. I've seen her on television.' With shaking hands she drew out Mrs. Driver's suitcases from under the wardrobe.

'She is. Some day she'll make the perfect wife for him. She's got poise and good social connections. She would know how to run his house.'

'You—you mean Wildsea Castle?'

Mrs. Driver nodded. 'Give her half a chance and she'd be up here playing the lady bountiful among the villagers, mistress of the castle and wife of the famous Shaun Sutherland, at the click of Shaun's fingers. But my nephew isn't caught that easily. Although I must admit, Ginni is pretty strong bait.'

During their customary early breakfast, which was served in Mrs. Driver's room, Cara thought about the move. Wildsea Castle stood on high land overlooking the village and the sea. Her heart sank when she realised what a strain it would be pushing her employer up the steep road on their way back from her daily outing to the village.

When Shaun came in, his manner was brisk and cool. Cara was kneeling down and packing Mrs. Driver's clothes. She glanced up at him. It was plain

that he had not forgotten the scene between them the night before. Nor had he forgiven.

'I see you've heard the news.' Cara nodded. Shaun turned to his aunt. 'We move out this afternoon. I've told the management and settled the bills--'

'I can settle my own bill, thank you.' A smile warmed his face for a swift moment. 'I'm well aware of that, Aunt. You're a lady of large fortune which you have every intention of passing on to our young friend here, your too-perfect companion-help.'

Cara knew his regard was fixed on her, knew the sarcasm she would find if she raised her head and looked at him, so she carried on with her work.

'Every intention,' his aunt responded brightly. 'It would take a great deal to make me let this girl go.'

'No matter what her indiscretion?'

'Indiscretion?' Mrs. Driver's sharp eyes fixed on Cara. 'Who's committed an indiscretion, Shaun? Have you--?'

'Aunt? Never let it be said that I would have to sink so low in my need for a woman that I'd try my luck with one of your companion-helps.' He made the term sound like an insult.

'Good-,' said his aunt. 'That's what I wanted to hear. And as for Miss Hirst's "indiscretions", they're a figment of your very active imagination. A girl as sweet and considerate as she is could not possibly be devious and scheming. She's as honest and straightforward as they come. And they come that way rarely enough, as I know only too well. Now, Miss Hirst, how are you progressing with the packing?'

'Quite fast, Mrs. Driver. You haven't many clothes, so--' She glanced up, accidentally meeting the nephew's eyes instead of the aunt's.

The wince she gave at his viciously sarcastic look must have been plainly discernible to him if not to his aunt. *Honest and straightforward?* She could

almost hear him thinking it. Yes, there was savagery beneath that veneer of imperturbability, the savagery with which he treated the fates and fortunes of many of the characters in his books— and those people in real life who, like herself, drew upon themselves his contempt and condemnation.

'I shall take you in my car, Aunt. Miss Hirst can follow in a taxi with the cases and all other possessions.'

Cara could not stop the jerk of her heart. So she was being demoted, she would follow in a taxi like a servant? She was not privileged enough to travel in the owner's car.

His aunt seemed satisfied enough with the arrangements. 'Where will we lunch, Shaun?' Mrs. Driver asked.

'Here. Immediately afterwards, we shall make the move. My things are already up there. I've virtually moved out of the hotel.'

'Your aunt has an afternoon rest, Mr. Sutherland.'

'I'm aware of that, Miss Hirst.' His tones were clipped. 'She'll take it after the move. Aunt, I've set aside two rooms for you on the ground floor in the west wing. It has a separate entrance, which means there won't be the problem of the front steps for you to negotiate.'

'Where are you putting Miss Hirst?'

A quick, contemptuous look in her direction told Miss Hirst exactly where he would like to put her—in the nearest rubbish bin. But he said, 'In the guest room above your suite of rooms.'

'But I must have her next to me.'

'You can't have her next to you, Aunt.' He spoke softly but decisively. 'There's no room I could put her into on the ground floor.'

'But,' Mrs. Driver seemed disconcerted, 'hasn't that particular guest room got a private bathroom attached?'

He nodded. 'It was installed in place of the dressing- room.'

'Isn't the accommodation just a little too—well, luxurious for a paid employee, young man?'

He smiled without humour. 'You think it will give Miss Hirst ideas above her station? But, Aunt, you can't deny how highly you have told me you regard Miss Hirst. Therefore, surely only the best is good enough for someone so valuable to you?'

'Well,' Mrs. Driver's voice was uncharacteristically uncertain, 'I can't deny the reasoning behind your question.'

'I don't care,' Cara's voice cut across the conversation which was about her yet excluded her, 'if you put me in a wooden shack, Mr. Sutherland. No doubt that's where you think I belong.'

'If I told you where I really thought you belonged, Miss Hirst, you'd probably have me arrested for insulting behaviour—or its verbal equivalent.'

'You really must not adopt that attitude towards my nephew, Miss Hirst,' Mrs. Driver rebuked. 'In putting you in the main guest room, he has demonstrated that he has only your—and consequently my—best interests at heart.'

Cara's defiant stare at the man in question brought forth a mocking, if silent, response. She returned to the task of packing and heard Mrs. Driver ask, 'Suppose I need Miss Hirst urgently or in the night, Shaun—how shall I contact her?'

'That's been taken care of. I've had bells run from your bedroom and living-room to Miss Hirst's room above.'

Cara sat back on her heels. Astonishment had made her pause. He had gone to that amount of trouble to accommodate his aunt? For how long had he had this move in mind? Since he had taken her there? Now Cara remembered what else the housekeeper had said to him that evening. 'It's time,' Mrs. Stapleton had said, 'the owner settled down.'

Was that what 'the owner' had in mind? Settling down in marriage with Ginni Ravenga?

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was while Cara was packing her own clothes that she realised she would have to let Steven know she was moving. After Shaun's discovery of the letters she had failed to collect, she had warned Steven not to write to her again, but knowing Steven, it was quite possible that he would take as much notice of her instructions this time as he had done before. In other words, he might simply ignore them.

With speed she wrote a few lines, addressed an envelope and raced along the corridor and down the stairs. The entrance hall seemed empty and the desk unattended, which meant that she could safely use the hotel's post box. Cara slid the letter from her jacket, trying to hide the action with exaggeratedly secretive movements, which simply had the effect of making her look as though she were picking her own pocket. The letter was pushed stealthily into the mouth of the post box.

'Cara?' She dropped the letter inside and jumped as though the wide, red mouth had bitten her wrist. She turned, full of guilt, her cheeks as scarlet as the letter box.

Shaun Sutherland stood at the door to the office behind the reception desk. His shoulder rested negligently against the frame. He seemed amused by her embarrassment, but the amusement, she knew, was barely skin-deep. He was angry with her, but at that moment, for the sake of appearances, his anger was kept in check. After all, wasn't Valerie Pendle hovering behind him and smiling serenely over his shoulder?

What, Cara wondered miserably, was the cause of that serenity? The question, she told herself, should have been 'who', and anyway she knew the answer.

Cara's instinct was to dash away, but because she knew that her employer's nephew would only call her back and proceed to humiliate her in front of his lady-friend, she stayed where she was.

'You want me, Mr. Sutherland?'

He looked lazily at his watch. 'You were in a tearing hurry to catch the post, especially in view of the fact that the next collection isn't for another two hours. Was it a letter full of loving phrases to the one dearest to your heart?'

'If you're trying to trick me into telling you my secret, Mr. Sutherland,' she responded boldly, especially in view of the interest the hotel owner's daughter was showing in yet another acrimonious conversation between her favourite guest and his aunt's companion-help, 'then you won't succeed.'

'So,' with a sardonic smile, 'it was a *love* letter?'

'No,' between her teeth, 'it was *not* a love letter.' And that, she thought, turning away, was the truth. In her hurry she had not had time to add even an affectionate, let alone a loving, word.

The move was behind them. Mrs. Driver was resting after the upheaval. Shaun had gone to great lengths to make his aunt comfortable.

The green drawing-room, with its gilded ceiling, its elaborate draperies and gilded mirrors had been made into a living-room. Leading out of it was a room called the boudoir. This had been furnished as a bedroom. The rather overpowering portraits had been replaced by less demanding pictures like landscapes and still life. The bed was of gleaming brass, the fireplace, screened for the summer, carved from marble.

From the moment of their arrival, Cara had scarcely had time to take a breath. Now, with an hour or two at her disposal, she could relax and begin to take into her system her changed surroundings. She tried also to assess just how they would change her life-style.

Her bedroom, she considered, would be a good starting-point. It was a room which, in its quiet taste, its carefully regulated splendour, could not be faulted. There was a snow-white fireplace, its overmantel superbly carved. On each side there were small portraits. Nearby, covering only a little of the patterned fabric on the walls, were other portraits.

The high-backed chairs, Cara estimated, were probably two hundred years old, possibly more. She wished, in her history studies, she had learned more about antiques. The house was full of them. The cut-glass chandelier caught the afternoon sunlight, played with it and sent it back transformed into the colours of the rainbow.

Through a door leading from the bedroom into a smaller room was the bathroom of which Mrs Driver had spoken. An indulgence, she had implied, for a mere employee. Maybe it was, but it was one Cara revelled in.

Only the bed, four-poster and canopied, filled her with awe. With reverent fingers she felt the embroideries which formed curtains around it, but now gathered and secured to the posts by cord. She turned away, deciding to unpack.

There was a tap at the door. Thinking it was Mrs Stapleton, she invited the caller in. When the handle turned and Shaun entered, Cara held her breath. His shirt was open-necked, his sleeves rolled high to reveal the dark hair which covered his arms to the wrists. The wide gold band of his wrist watch emphasised the tan which also browned his throat and chest, a portion of which was revealed by the turned-back shirt collar. Around his waist was a leather belt, his trousers maroon and sleek-fitting.

He was dressed with a touch of carelessness, but his manner held an authority which must* through circumstances, have lain dormant beneath that veneer of lazy indolence which he had chosen to show to the world outside his home territory. As a resident in a hotel, he had been one of many guests. In Wildsea Castle, there was no doubt about it, he was master.

He hooked his thumbs over the belt and looked at Cara unsmilingly. 'You find this room sufficient for your requirements? Have you everything you want?'

'More than I want, really, thank you.' He frowned, yet she knew by experience he was not really puzzled. He was, she was certain, about to be cynical at her expense. 'Fantastic,' he murmured. 'You're speaking like that modest, honest, diffident girl I interviewed in London who, when I gave her a wad of money for her expenses, told me it was too much and tried to give

some of it back. Yet I know now that that same girl is dishonest, self-seeking and deceitful.'

She coloured again, with a quick, burning anger. 'You're insulting me, Mr. Sutherland, as only you, with your ruthless tongue and savage mind, can do.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'No insult intended, Miss Hirst. I was speaking the truth. What's more, you know it.'

'I don't know it!' Self-seeking? Never! She didn't want Mrs. Driver's fortune. But there was Steven. Wasn't she being dishonest and deceitful about him? Could she sincerely deny her host's accusations? Miserably she turned to gaze out at the grey North Sea. High up as the house was and perched on a rock, it seemed as if the waves lapped their feet.

He came across the room to stand beside her. 'One of the best views in the house, from the best viewing place in the house. This was, in olden times, the State Bedroom.'

She swung round. 'Then surely it's too good for me, Mr. Sutherland? Someone with a character as bad as mine shouldn't be allowed to set foot inside it!'

He responded coolly, 'Would you have preferred to sleep in the servants' quarters?'

She bit her lip. His question had gone home. The fact that he had seen fit to put her here required gratitude, not abuse. She said, her voice low and without looking at him, 'Thank you for giving me this wonderful bedroom, Mr. Sutherland.'

In silence he left her.

Dressing Mrs. Driver for dinner, Cara experienced a sudden and disturbing ground swell of resentment against the embargo which had been placed upon her by her employer. Why, she thought rebelliously, should she help Mrs. Driver, no longer young, her life largely behind her, to look her best

when she, Cara, was forced to dine in the clothes, the heavy, deadly clothes, in which she spent every hour of the day?

It had not happened before, this fierce, frightening feeling. The reason, she supposed, was that, living in a hotel, she had accepted the uniform as being symbolic of her position of anonymous, subservient employee. To be living in this great, distinguished mansion was, however, a very different matter. Although she had only been there a few hours, already it had started to bring out a side of her which longed to rise to its demands. She was beginning to identify with it to such an extent that she felt it was an insult on her employer's part to force her to wear a uniform within its walls.

Leaving Mrs. Driver in her wheelchair, Cara went upstairs to her own room. Listlessly, she ran a comb through her hair. There was nothing else she was allowed to do to make herself look attractive. But as she contemplated her reflection, her mind dreamed. Gone was the white, schoolgirl blouse, the harsh black skirt. In its place was chiffon and filminess, a haze of colour rippling about her body, setting off the fairness of her hair.

The face above it was animated and gay. Behind her stood a man, tall, dark-haired, his brown eyes dark with desire, his face enigmatic as the light from the chandelier threw it into shadow. He was smiling as his hands came to rest on her bare shoulders. He turned her slowly ...

The dinner gong sounded through the house and the image faded. Her dream, her release from stark reality, was over. With stiff fingers, she fastened the top button of her blouse and made her way downstairs to wheel Mrs. Driver into the dining-room.

It was a room that took her breath away. The walls were panelled in a reddish-brown wood which Cara took to be mahogany. Over the fireplace, was a painting of a family group. Cara considered the style of the clothes worn by the members of the family and guessed that it was nearly two hundred years old. Nearby was a portrait of a man in the robes of a Knight of the Garter. On the wall at one end of the room was a painting of a dark-haired woman, her features exquisite, her gown low-cut. It was, Shaun explained, following Cara's admiring eyes, a portrait of his

great-grandmother. There was no doubt in Cara's mind that the family likeness lived on in Shaun, even to the colour of the hair.

'On his father's side,' Mrs. Driver said a little dismissively, nodding towards the woman's portrait. Yet how could she dismiss such things, such priceless possessions, such history as was tied up in this magnificent place?

'The house has been in the family,' Shaun explained, 'for nearly three centuries. When my ancestors bought it, it was indeed a castle, but neglected and decaying. There was enough money in the family--'

There always has been,' his aunt interposed a trifle acidly.

Shaun smiled. 'Enough money,' he continued, 'to save some of the original, but most of it was swept away and a new building constructed on the site. Hence its comfort and grandeur, missing from other buildings along the northeast coast. They really are castles. It may have retained the word in its name—Wildsea Castle—but it's really a home.'

'It needs love,' Mrs. Driver commented pointedly, 'to make a house a home.'

Shaun smiled again, and raised an eyebrow. 'You agree with that sentiment^ Miss Hirst?'

Cara turned away to stare at the portrait of the family. 'I wouldn't know, Mr. Sutherland. I haven't got a home.'

There was silence for a few moments, then, 'Oh, but you will have one day, my dear Miss Hirst. Stay with me, see me through the few years I have left, and you'll be able to buy yourself a place as large and grand as this, if you so desired.'

Cara turned from the family portrait and dredged a smile from her depths. 'You're very kind, Mrs. Driver.'

'Kind?' her employer retorted. 'Nothing of the sort. I'm merely looking after number one. I'm taking good care to make the bait attractive enough to tie you to me for the rest of my existence on this earth. Now, my dear nephew,

when is that food arriving? I see by your formal clothes that you're intending to honour us with your presence at dinner tonight.'

'Tonight and every night, Aunt. I don't shut myself away in my own room when I'm at home as I do when I'm living in a hotel suite.'

'Well,' said his aunt, 'I've done my best to live up to these grand surroundings. I've dressed for dinner, too, with my companion's assistance.'

The brown eyes moved to the girl who stood patiently behind the wheelchair. There was no admiration in his glance. 'And your companion? Has she "dressed for dinner"?''

'Miss Hirst is on duty,' his aunt snapped, and indicated that she wished to be pushed towards the dining table.

It was set simply, for three, but all the same the grandeur of the room transmitted itself to the brilliant white cloth, silver cudery and glasses.

The long table stretched into the room. Twelve or more, Cara calculated, could surely be accommodated easily if the owner wished. At each end was a majestic chair, with curving arms. One for the master of the house, one for its mistress. But the master of this house had, it seemed, never been inclined to take to himself a life partner and confer on her the privilege of being his wife and equal. So the chair remained empty.

'Miss Hirst,' her host said, his voice prodding her to a consciousness of her surroundings. He indicated a chair to his right.

'No, no,' said his aunt. 'Miss Hirst must take her place here, by my side, which is where she belongs.'

Cara looked uncertainly at Shaun. There was no doubt in her own mind as to which instruction she wanted to obey. Their eyes held, hers questioning, his inscrutable. He seemed to give a mental shrug and his hand indicated the chair next to his aunt.

It was after dinner, when Mrs. Driver was filled with good food, and the little wine she had allowed herself to drink, that her nephew chose to spring his surprise. The time, Cara thought afterwards, must have been carefully chosen so as to coincide with his aunt's weakened powers of rejection.

Mrs. Stapleton seemed to appear as if at a prearranged signal. Shaun gave her a brief nod and she went out again. There was silence. As they waited, puzzled, his aunt looked at him sharply, but remained silent. Cara's eyes sought Shaun's momentarily, too, her pulses speeding as she caught in his quick glance a smiling secret. In his formal dress he looked distinguished and darkly attractive. His hair, thick and curling to his collar, shone in the reflected light from the chandelier above their heads.

The housekeeper returned, pushing in front of her a wheelchair, a new, blue-upholstered wheelchair. The first thing Cara noticed about it, after overcoming her shock, was that there were no handles attached to its back with which to propel it. There were upholstered arms, but the front portion of one of them held buttons to be pressed, by which she assumed the occupier of the chair could direct the path the chair would take. In fact, it was an electrically operated wheelchair, which meant that whoever used it would* be independent of help from an attendant. The housekeeper stood smiling, hands folded, waiting.

Mrs. Driver's face turned scarlet. Her benign mood had gone beyond reach. It took her no more than a few seconds to grasp what was happening. 'You won't make me use it,' she stormed. 'It was a trick of yours, Shaun. For years you've been urging me to buy a more modern chair ...'

'And you've refused,' her nephew cut in. 'So I've bought you one instead.'

'I don't need it, I tell you. I won't use it!' She was shaking and almost beside herself with anger, and Cara, anxious for her well-being, rose to rest a hand on her shoulder, hoping to calm her. 'I've got Miss Hirst to push me about. She's strong, it's part of her job. She's accepted the fact from the start.'

'And from the start, Aunt,' her nephew said quietly, 'she's been quietly straining herself, her muscles, her limbs and heaven knows what else, pushing you up and down corridors, hills and roads. You wouldn't have

noticed, because all that time she was behind you, where you couldn't see her. I, however, have seen her, and haven't missed the way she has hidden her distress when pushing you around.'

'She's never complained.' Mrs. Driver looked up into Cara's face. 'You've never complained, have you, my dear? You've never minded--'

'Miss Hirst is not the complaining type, Aunt. She's one of those damnably long-suffering creatures who suffer in silence, quelling all their rebellion and natural instincts. Even if she suffered like hell inside, she would never let anyone- know. Which is why she's put up with your querulous demands and your outmoded thinking for so long and hasn't walked herself off like all the others.'

Mrs. Driver's eyes swung up to Cara's again. 'You wouldn't walk off, Miss Hirst? You wouldn't leave a helpless old woman without aid, without assistance, not when I need you so much?'

Shaun's glance held hers. It was challenging. 'Remind her about the fortune you intend to leave her, Aunt, and you'll get the answer you want.'

His cynicism was like a knife wound. As Cara answered and saw his look of victory, she bled a little inside. 'I—I'll look after you, Mrs. Driver, I know how much you rely on me—' Only too well, she agonised.

'You wish me to accept the gift of that new chair, Miss Hirst? Was my nephew right in his observations? You have found it a strain pushing me about in that old chair?'

'Be honest, Cara,' a sharp voice warned.

His words dismayed her. Did he mistrust her so much that he felt he had to warn her to be truthful? 'Yes, Mrs. Driver,' she whispered.

'Return to your seat, Miss Hirst,' Mrs. Driver directed. For a few long moments they waited. In Mrs. Driver's face there was evidence of an intense private struggle. 'Shaun, I accept your gift,' she said at last, 'but I cannot truly thank you for it. That chair,' she indicated the old one, 'is part of me.' She

turned her head to one side. 'Take it away, Mrs Stapleton.' When the housekeeper had reached the door, Mrs Driver took a quick, final look at the chair. 'You are taking away a friend,' she murmured.

Mrs. Driver had made an immense sacrifice. And it was a sacrifice which frightened Cara by its implications. Paradoxically, by granting such a concession, by making herself just a little more independent of Cara's help, and by making her work just that little less of a burden, Mrs. Driver had bound her companion-help to her even more securely.

It was later than usual when Cara closed her employer's living-room door, leaving her to her evening's television watching. Her nephew had thoughtfully provided her with a television set plus a pile of books by her favourite authors.

Cara, glad to be free at last, if only for a couple of hours, went upstairs to her bedroom. When she opened the door, she stopped in her tracks. Across the room, against the wall between the two large windows, was a television set. It stood importantly on its stand, and a quick, astonished glance told Cara that it was a colour set, as large as the one her employer was now watching!

Tears rushed to her eyes, tears of gratitude that the generosity her employer's nephew had shown to his aunt had included her, too. She must thank him now, at once! Wasn't there a saying, 'He who thanks quickly thanks twice'? Her father was fond of repeating it.

She retraced her steps along the corridor and back down the stairs, having no idea where she would find the owner of the house. In the great hall she stared at the archways, wondering which to pass through. One led past her employer's suite of rooms, while beyond another was a door which, she recalled from her lightning tour the evening Shaun had brought her there, led to the saloon. Timidly she turned the door handle and crept in. The saloon was empty. The tapestries which covered the walls, depicting scenes from ancient myths, filled her with awe.

Another door stood open, which seemed to lead to the writing-room. Here the prevailing shade was green. It tinted the ceiling with its carving highlighted with gold, it shone from the satin upholstery of the chairs and coloured the wallpaper reaching high to the frieze. But Cara looked in vain for some sign of life. Of painted beings, long since part of the past, there were many, but of any sign of living creatures there was none.

The magnificence of each and every room dwarfed her into nothingness. She, a twentieth-century being, was insignificant. Here in this house, the past dominated and came into its own. She clasped her hands, which were growing moist with mounting tension. Where now?

Yet another door stood challengingly across the room, two doors together defying her to try them, to pit her mortal strength against their intimidatingly immortal solidity.

But she stared, trying to summon the courage to approach them, one of them opened. She found herself gazing into the surprised eyes of the owner. She had tracked him down at last.

'Looking for me?'

His eyebrows flicked upwards as if he could not think why, but he said, 'Come into the library. We can hardly have a cosy chat across a great void, filled though it is with relics of the past.'

She smiled slightly and followed him into the other room. 'To me there would be no present without the past.'

He closed the double doors behind them. 'You regard it as sacrilege to dismiss the past so lightly? Of course, I should have remembered. You're an historian, aren't you?'

She shook her head.

'You're being too modest, Miss Hirst. Don't let your present intellectually undemanding post as companion-help allow you to forget your academic achievements.'

'I'm not an historian,' she corrected. 'I am—I was—a history teacher.'

'Then why aren't you now?'

If his sudden question was intended to disconcert, he succeeded. She coloured, pressing her lips together and turning away. Her eyes were drawn by the books, masses of them, all around. Some were ancient, leather-bound and wonderfully preserved. Many volumes must have been first editions, costly and priceless. Most were in glass-fronted cabinets; some on white-painted shelves protected by close meshed wire netting.

Near the end of the library was an archway supported by stone pillars. Through it Cara could see a writing desk covered in papers and opened books. There was a typewriter, and in it a sheet of paper. Shaun Sutherland had been working on another of his novels and she, Cara, had been audacious enough to interrupt him.

He glanced at the typewriter as a hungry man looks at food which is waiting for him but which, out of politeness to an unexpected guest, he cannot touch. However, he kept his irritation, if indeed he felt any, under strict control. Cara, seeing his glance, apologised for interrupting.

'It doesn't matter,' he replied with a sigh. 'The words weren't coming. Somewhere in my head there's a blockage damming my thoughts, holding them back.' He ran irritable fingers through his hair, then pushed his hands into his trouser pockets and asked her what she wanted.

She stared down, smoothing her skirt over her hips. It was a nervous action, but it caught his attention. Black and straight though the skirt was, it did not completely hide the neatness of the curves beneath. He dwelt for a thoughtful moment on that part of her anatomy, his interested glance moving upwards to the narrowness of her waist. The rest of her was lost beneath the looseness of her blouse, but as she lifted her eyes at last, she saw an expression in his which gave a hint of his thoughts. Was he recalling once again the day they had first met and, at his invitation, she had removed her coat? That sweater she had worn had been ribbed and clinging ...

'I went up to my room just now,' Cara said, 'and saw the television set. I had to thank you for your kindness.'

He shrugged slightly. 'There'll be little enough for you to do here. No bars to hide away in, no young people to watch with envy in your eyes.'

Her gaze roamed about the library. 'Books,' she said. 'I love books.'

'Sorry, strictly forbidden.'

She flushed. 'So you don't trust me?' He was silent. 'I am, of course, a mere paid servant--'

'Would I have given "a mere paid servant" a television set all to herself?'

'You might,' she blazed, still smarting from his lack of trust. 'To keep her mind and her thieving hands off your valuable property.'

He looked meaningfully at the clock in a glass case on the mantelshelf. 'You've thanked me,' he said coldly. 'Is there anything else?'

'I'm sorry.' Why did she always have to be so rude to him? 'There is something else.'

He motioned to a settee. It was covered in striped gold and white satin. Cara sat upright, her hands in her lap. Shaun lounged,, corner-wise against the upholstery.

'The wheelchair you bought your aunt—it was kind of you to consider me.'

'There's no end to my "kindness", is there?' he smiled sarcastically. 'As a matter of fact, I had the well-being of the floors of the house in mind when I bought it. The wheels of the old chair would have played havoc with them, damaging them beyond repair.'

So it wasn't for her that he had insisted on his aunt's acceptance of his gift. She coloured deeply and rose to go.

'Please forgive me for misunderstanding your motive.' She tried to put as much sarcasm into her words as he had into his. 'I shouldn't have been so stupid as to think that, however much you might give such an impression to your aunt in order to make her accept the chair, you would ever really consider the health of a mere companion-help above that of the maltreatment of the floors of your house!'

She cowered inwardly, waiting for the lash of his sarcastic tongue, but it did not come. He stayed silent, merely rising to join her. He seemed to be waiting—for her departure, she supposed. She went towards the double doors. 'I honestly meant to thank you, Mr. Sutherland. I didn't mean it to turn into yet another argument.'

He lifted his shoulders carelessly, as if it meant nothing to him whether they quarrelled or not. 'You said there was something else.'

'Yes, there was. Thank you for reminding me.' He gave an ironic bow. 'I noticed that your aunt's new chair has no handles for me to guide it. But the road to the house has a steep gradient. She won't be able to manoeuvre the chair up and down the hill. How will she get down to the village to see her friends?'

'I've thought of that, too. My "kindness" has extended to acquiring yet another piece of equipment. I've bought you a car.'

There was a stunned silence. 'You've bought a car for *me*?

'I assume you can drive?' She nodded. 'Then you can take my aunt from here down into the village, or anywhere else she fancies. It's an estate model with plenty of room in the back for her chair.'

'It—it was very good of you--'

'A necessity.' He looked at her quizzically. 'So I'm not only kind now, but good, too?'

Her lashes lowered. 'I haven't known you long enough to be a judge of that, Mr. Sutherland.'

'Come, now. You've known me a couple of months at least. Long enough, surely, to assess my qualities, both good and bad.' A pause, then, softly, 'I've even kissed you a couple of times. You must know by now whether or not you like me.'

She was silent, keeping her eyes on the pattern of the carpet as determinedly as if her life depended on it.

'The car is in the garage beside mine.' She started to thank him again, but he cut in, 'Miss Hirst.' She looked at him. 'The car is to be used for no other purpose.'

She stiffened. That mistrust again! 'What other purpose would you suppose I had in mind?'

'A trip to London, perhaps?'

Her breathing quickened slightly. Was he probing? 'When I came to live here, I left London behind me in more ways than one.' She checked her thoughts, dismayed. What was she saying? What did she mean?

He looked at her consideringly. 'Explain yourself, Miss Hirst. You intrigue me.'

She intrigued herself, too. What was happening to her? Wildsea Castle was not her home. Even if she stayed with Mrs. Driver—and that was inconceivable—they would not remain there for ever.

She said a brief 'Thank you for everything', and closed the double doors carefully behind her.

It was no use. She could not sleep. It must, she decided, be that canopy over the four-poster bed. It needed time to get used to it. Her thoughts troubled her so much she tossed and turned and turned again.

Over and over again her brain repeated the words, *Wildsea Castle is not my home*. Impatient at last, she swung her feet to the floor—it seemed a long way down—and felt with her toes for her mules. The curtains were drawn back and at regular intervals the flashes from the lighthouse flooded the room. There was no need to switch on a light. Her negligee was on a chair beside her. It was as lightweight as the long nightdress which trailed the carpet as she crossed to the window. The warning flashes swept the sea and sky. Now the islands were in total darkness. Now they were illuminated momentarily, a low-lying, crouching mass of land against the night sky.

They belonged to Shaun Sutherland, every single rock of them. They called her, those islands. Part of her yearned to break free and get out to them, whether by boat or even by swimming. It didn't matter, as long as she reached them.

They represented a haven from her troubles—storm-washed, wave-battered, wind-swept, but a haven, nonetheless.

Sighing, she turned away, eyeing the bed. It was no use climbing back into it, because she knew sleep would not come. If she had a book ... The library—dared she go there, take a book, creep away with it, returning it first thing in the morning, before Shaun was awake?

She would dare anything, she reasoned, to get away from this loneliness, this odd yearning which had her wandering from bed to window and back again.

The door creaked as she opened it. She held her breath, but nothing disturbed the corridor's deep silence, not even the creep of her footsteps over the carpet. To her weary brain the stairs, as she descended them, were as steep as Everest, the tiled floor of the hall cold as a glacier beneath her slippered feet.

Using her torch, she found her way to the saloon. She passed through this and into the writing-room, treading silently across to the double doors which led to the library. One of the doors stood open, revealing that the place was in darkness. So Shaun was not at his desk, agonising over his work into the early hours. She felt along the wall for the light switch and the click as she turned it on made her jump.

Strictly forbidden. Shaun's words came back to her like an echo across a valley. For anyone but the highly privileged, the books were beyond reach. But, like a child refusing unwanted food, she pushed the words to the back of her mind. She would treat the books carefully. She would do them no harm.

One bookcase, she noticed, was unprotected by the wire mesh which covered the others. Brown and red leather-bound volumes, some paling with age, invited eager fingers to reach out and take them down. Excitedly Cara turned the pages, savouring their quality and their leather smell, relishing their contents. These books, she thought, were not *about* history, they were part of history. It was here, in her hands!

She placed two volumes on a table and continued with her wanderings. She knew what she was looking for—yes, there they were, on shelves above the desk at which Shaun worked. The books bore brightly-coloured dust jackets—Shaun Sutherland's own books.

Her movements were jerky with excitement. It was there, her favourite novel, the one book of all his others that she had read again and again. She picked up the two leather-bound volumes and made her way across to the settee. Later, she would read the 'forbidden' books, but first she would re-read the chapter in Shaun's novel which, having read it so often in the past, she had learnt almost by heart. Now that she knew the man who had written the words, they held an even deeper meaning. She was totally absorbed, her mind blotting out every vestige of reality.

So she did not hear the creak of floorboards. She heard nothing until the man was in the room. She looked up, petrified, into the eyes of Shaun Sutherland. Her senses had been heightened by the passionate words she had been reading, and there seemed to be a wild air about him. For a frightening moment her rationality deserted her and it was as if he had stepped out of the gilded frame which held the portrait of one of his ancestors, the portrait she had seen that day he had brought her here, the day she had discovered he was the owner.

His dark hair was ruffled as though tortured fingers had raked it. His shirt was thrust carelessly and loosely into the waistband of his trousers. He had

not bothered to fasten a single button. His hands were clenched into fists on his hips, his legs apart a little as if challenging an enemy to do battle.

Detail by detail, he surveyed the scene with eyes narrowed and inscrutable. Mercilessly they moved over the figure curled up on the settee, at the fair hair glowing in the splintered light from the chandelier; at the wide, tired but strangely excited blue eyes which stared up at him as if the owner of them could not make out which world she was in—the real or the imagined.

Slowly he went towards her, hands still on hips. She shrank away. She could do nothing now to hide those telltale volumes, or to disguise from him that she was reading one of his own books. This, with the pages opened wide, she pressed to her chest in a childlike action calculated to prevent him seeing what she was reading.

'Forbidden, I said.' His voice was low, but he spoke through tightened lips. His body was rigid, his eyes blazed. 'You have them all, down to your fingertips, haven't you? Dishonesty, untrustworthiness, deceit. There isn't a particle of that alluring body that doesn't contain at least a grain of those unpleasant personality defects.'

There was no defence against his accusations because they were all partially true. Honesty, he had said, he valued above all else, and she had lied to him so many times. But did he know she had lied? And if so, how? Now she had transgressed again, trespassed on his private territory and handled his precious, priceless, 'forbidden' books.

She swallowed deeply. If she was going to cry, she mustn't let him see. Uncurling herself and swinging her feet to the floor, she murmured, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'll put the books away. I—I promise I'll never come in here again.' Still she hugged his book to her chest as if by doing so, it afforded her some protection from his anger.

She waited for him to respond, but no response came. He was maintaining one of his silences, which were worse, much worse, than a torrent of abuse. There was only the sound of his deep breathing as he looked down on her bent head. He said softly but with a thread of threat running through his voice,

'If I had my way at this moment, I'd up-end you and thrash you! Not only have you done something I strictly forbade you to do, but you've made me forget completely the paragraph I had, with enormous difficulty, constructed in my mind. I had managed to overcome the strange mental blockage which has been afflicting me these last few days in my writing. I came down here expressly to commit it to paper and what do I find? Yow, impudently occupying what is strictly my territory, curled up on the settee, blandly reading. What shall I do with you?'

His hand came out and grasped her wrist, pulling her against him. But still the book pressed closely to her kept them apart. Tremulously she raised her eyes to his. Had she detected a softening in his tone?

'What are you reading?' She told him the name of the book. 'I can see that for myself. You think I can't read the words on the cover? What part, I meant, which particular passage?' He tried to prise the book away.

'No, no!' She flushed with embarrassment—and a stirring of desire which she had never known before. His hand, which had insinuated itself between the book and her body, set her heart racing.

He smiled. 'I'm quite content to stay this way until you let me have the book. All night, if necessary.'

Her colour deepened. The more she pressed the book to her, the closer to her body she pressed his hand. Slowly she eased the pressure and with wide, troubled eyes she surrendered the book to him.

'Yes, I thought you would let me have it. Sit next to me, my dear Miss Hirst,' he placed himself on the settee and watched her lower herself beside him, 'and let me see what it is that pleases one of my most devoted fans.'

He began to read and a smile touched his lips. He glanced at her, then went back to the book. It was a passionate love scene he was reading, a deeply moving study of a couple in love, making love, knowing that next day they must part. The length of that parting neither of them knew. Their lovemaking was all the more passionate for that unknown and tormenting factor.

The silence of the night was broken with every page he turned. At last he closed the book. 'It's a few years since I wrote that.'

Her elbow was on her knee, her chin cupped in her hand. She said a little sourly, 'I can hardly believe you wrote those beautiful passages.'

He laughed. 'You think me incapable, now you know me, of experiencing such depth of feeling, such compassion and tenderness?'

'Yes, I do. Anyway, it wasn't you you were writing about, was it? It was a character in the story.'

He leaned forward to be level with her, linking his hands loosely between his knees. 'It was part of me, Cara. All writers use parts of their own personalities.'

She turned her head and their eyes held. Fascinated, she whispered, 'I still don't believe it.'

He put his hand over hers. 'Try me, Cara? Will you let me show you that side of me?'

She tore her eyes away before he could read the longing in them. 'No, no. It's not my way at all. I don't believe a woman should let any man--'

'I'm not "any man", Cara.'

No, her mind whispered, you're Shaun Sutherland, the man I love ... She caught her breath.

'Now what's the matter, sweet?'

Already he was talking like a lover, anticipating her eventual acquiescence.

'There's—there's--' She was really talking to herself, reminding herself that there was Steven, the man she was going to marry.

'Yes?' His thick brows were drawn together, his voice quick and sharp.

'There's--' She passed her tongue over her lips. She was going to lie to him again. 'There's your aunt. She would get to know and dismiss me, and that would mean the end of my job here.'

'And,' the voice was hard now, 'the end of your expectations where her fortune is concerned?'

She was silent, leaning back and resting against a cushion, turning her head to one side and closing her eyes. She was exhausted. The night seemed long, so long ... Her body became still as if in sleep. When arms came round her she did not push them away. There was no more fight within her. When hands lifted her feet on to the settee and then pulled her back against a hard chest, so close she could hear the rhythmic drumming under the ribs and feel the fine hair beneath her cheek, she allowed it all to happen.

Shaun Sutherland was cradling her in his arms, his hand was stroking her hair, her throat, pushing aside her negligee and--

'No,' she murmured, 'no.' Then she fell asleep.

When she awoke, she was alone, but she was not in her bed. She was still on the settee. A blanket had been draped over her. From the alcove in which Shaun worked came the tapping of typewriter keys.

She sat up with a start and Shaun stopped work. He came to stand in front of her and he was smiling. His eyes were bright, his whole bearing tense and invigorated.

'It's coming,' he said, 'the words are flowing again. The dam which has blockaded my thoughts for days has been breached.'

'I'm—I'm glad,' she said faintly. 'Didn't you—didn't you sleep?'

'Yes, I slept. With you in my arms.' His hand ruffled her hair, tangling it still more.

'The time!' She looked at her wrist. Of course, her watch was not in place! 'What is the time, Mr.--?'

'Call me Shaun, or I won't tell you.'

'Shaun,' she whispered.

'Six o'clock. You have half an hour to make yourself decent before my aunt demands your attentions. Shall I carry you upstairs to your room?'

She stood hastily. 'Thank you, but no. Someone might see us.'

'Would it be so terrible if they did?' If she said 'yes', he would taunt her about losing his aunt's fortune. If she said 'no', it would mean she did not care what people thought of her and that therefore her protestations that to let any man make love to her was not her way were false. She opted for silence.

He swooped to lift her, but she managed to evade him and ran to the doors, opening one. She glanced back over her shoulder. 'Thanks,' she said, smiling, 'for giving me such a comfortable night's sleep.'

He took a few steps towards her. 'Are you provoking me, you impudent little minx?'

She fled from him and reached her room without being seen.

During the morning, when Cara was reading the newspaper to Mrs. Driver in her living-room, Shaun came in. He stood aside to allow the housekeeper to pass him. She was carrying a tray on which she stacked the empty coffee cups.

Mrs. Driver frowned and turned to her companion-help. She was plainly endeavouring to ignore her nephew's presence. As Mrs. Stapleton withdrew, Mrs. Driver said, 'Proceed with your reading, Miss Hirst.'

'Aunt.' At her nephew's voice, Mrs. Driver's head came up sharply. 'I've come to borrow your companion.'

'You can't have her. Go away, young man.'

Ignoring his aunt's petulance, Shaun held out his hand. 'Cara?'

Cara eyed that hand. Was she supposed to place hers in it? And in front of his aunt? She raised her eyes to his, questioning him silently. His expression was unbelievably warm and the memory of how she had spent the night came flooding back. With those arms around her, that lean, hard body against hers ... To her, it was a night she would never forget. To him, it was yet another spent in the company of a woman, only differing from all the others because she had not given him what he must have taken so easily from every other woman he had slept with.

Growing impatient, he walked across and took her hand, pulling her to stand beside him. As she felt the sensitive skin of her palm rubbing against his, felt him force her fingers open so as to entwine his between them, she coloured deeply. He was smiling, and it was with an uprush of pleasure that she gave smile for smile.

When she remembered they were not alone, when she realised how he was not only not bothering to hide their growing intimacy, but flaunting it deliberately before his aunt, Cara turned with alarm to look at Mrs. Driver. There was tight-lipped displeasure on her employer's face, and the amply-endowed chest rose and fell with unspoken reproof.

Fearful of the consequences if she disobeyed her employer, Cara tugged at her imprisoned hand. But as an attempt to escape, it was doomed before it began. The smile on Shaun's face hardened, and she saw—and felt—the determination with which he was holding on to her.

He drew her with him to face his aunt. Mrs. Driver's eyes darted, deeply suspicious, from one to the other.

'I shall deliver her back to you safe and sound, Aunt.'

'Where are you taking her?' his aunt called helplessly after them, but he seemed to take pleasure in keeping her guessing. Now it was Cara who asked, a little petulantly, where they were going. In answer he smiled and tightened his fingers round hers. They went along the hall towards the domestic quarters, which were more extensive than Cara had realised. They came up against Mrs. Stapleton who, startled, moved to one side to let them pass.

Didn't he *care*, Cara thought in anguish, what the domestic staff thought of her? Didn't he realise what they might be thinking? Or was he actually enjoying giving them the impression that he was conducting a secret affair with his aunt's rather plain, very dowdy-looking companion?

This thought hurt more than any other possibility and as they emerged into the daylight round the back of the building—it was on the side away from the sea—Cara jerked him to a standstill.

'I insist on knowing where you're taking me.'

He smiled down at her. 'Only to the garages. It's far too early in the day for me to have a secret assignation in mind, unless,' the dark eyebrows lifted sardonically, 'the idea appeals to you?'

'Will you please let me have my hand?'

In answer he tightened his grip and pulled her behind him. 'The garages,' he explained, 'were once the stables.'

He was walking fast and she gasped, 'How—how many cars have you got, Mr. Sutherland?'

He stopped short, jerking her back as she ran on under her own momentum. 'I told you to call me Shaun.'

'Shaun,' she said meekly.

'Three cars,' he said. 'There they are.' One was sleek, blue and bore a famous name. The second was a little smaller and was a dull yellow. The third was, beside the others, very small indeed.

'Is this--' Cara indicated the smallest, 'mine?'

'No.' He smiled and indicated an adjoining garage. 'Yours, as you call it, is here.' It was, as he had said, an estate car with a rear door which lifted for luggage. 'My aunt's chair can go in there. By the way, a correction is called for. You called it "yours". It's not. It is for the use of my aunt's companion-help, whoever she may be. I should require—shall we say—far more from a woman than you seem prepared to give if I were to buy her something as expensive as a car.'

With amusement he watched her colour heighten. 'I'm sorry,' she choked. 'It was presumptuous of me.' She swung away and began the long walk back, but he was after her and had her wrist in a handcuff grip.

'Next time, minx, think before you speak. You could get yourself—involved.' His tone was a mixture of intimacy and authority and she squirmed with humiliation.

'Next time,' she said between her teeth, 'I won't even speak. I won't say a word.'

'Stop acting like a schoolgirl and sit in the driving seat.' He opened the car door and let her in. 'How does it measure up to cars you've driven before?'

'Bigger,' she answered, 'quite a lot bigger.'

'You've owned a car yourself?'

'No, I've only driven my--' She caught her breath, pressed her lips together like a child and with childlike fear, looked at him.

'Your--?' His eyebrows rose slowly.

Boy-friend's, she thought. 'My—my father's,' she said. Another lie. Did he believe her or had her unmistakable fear given her away?

'I see.' The words were spoken quietly, but something in his tone had Cara's heart beating painfully. How much longer could this masquerade go on before she blurted out the truth?

He explained the controls and felt in his pocket, pulling out the car keys. 'Switch on the engine. Reverse it out and we'll go for a ride. I want to see how well you drive. After all,' with a mocking smile, 'I'm putting my aunt's life in your hands.' He got in the other side. 'She's promised you her fortune on her decease, remember.'

Her head swung round. 'That's a filthy thing to say! You can keep your miserable car!' And she dived out of the door. But she was not quick enough. The garage wall cut off her retreat and he grappled with her, catching her by the hips and tugging her back.

She sprawled against him and was furious at her weakness compared with his strength. He laughed loudly, clearly enjoying himself. She wriggled, trying to free herself from his hands which were still clamped securely on to her hips.

'I'm not letting you go,' he said, 'until we're on the move.'

Even through the thickness of her black skirt she felt the intimate pressure of his hands. 'Let me go,' she pleaded. 'I promise to stay in the car.'

Slowly he relaxed his hold and sat upright. At first she drove with exaggerated care, but as she became used to the feel of the vehicle, their speed increased and her confidence grew.

'Good,' said Shaun. Turn back now. I must return you to my aunt before the search party is sent out to recover you from my clutches.'

When she garaged the car, she handed him back the keys, but he refused them. 'They're yours. You never know when my aunt might take it into her head to go on an outing.'

As they went into the house by the main staircase, Cara told him, 'Tomorrow your aunt has her monthly check-up and treatment at the hospital in the town. There'll be no need for you to take her now, will there?'

'No, indeed. That can be your pleasure.'

In the entrance hall, he turned to go. 'Mr.--' His frown cautioned her. 'Shaun.' Her voice was weak because it still sounded too familiar. 'I'd like to thank you for being so considerate.' He seemed to be waiting for more. 'In buying all these things to make life so much easier—the chair, the car ...'

'Maybe I don't want to lose you.' He watched the pleasure stain her cheeks and brighten her eyes. 'After all, it was becoming a bit tedious travelling down to London at regular intervals interviewing all those young women. My aunt's so fussy, I thought I'd never find the right one. Obviously, in her eyes, this time I did.'

Slowly the pleasure faded from her face. He smiled and there was a touch of cruelty about his mouth. He raised a careless hand and left her.

While her employer was resting that afternoon, Cara stared out of her bedroom window. There was a breeze, but it did little more than ruffle the sea's surface. Its comparative calm did nothing to soothe the restlessness that troubled her in mind and body.

She wandered across to the wardrobe and looked at its contents. Why had she even bothered to bring those dresses, those tops and jeans? She had known when she had accepted the job that she would never be allowed to wear them. An idea caught at her mind, giving her new life. Her employer was sleeping. Shaun was working, immersed in his writing.

If she dressed in her own clothes, just for once while no one was looking, and went out for a short walk, what harm would it do? None whatsoever, she argued. On the contrary, it would make her feel so much better, so much more normal, so completely *feminine* again it was even worth the risk of being discovered.

As she slid denim pants and a white, short-sleeved cardigan top from a hanger, the telephone rang down in the hall. It was soon answered and there was silence, but Cara waited. Whoever had gone into the hall—probably Mrs. Stapleton, who usually took all phone calls—might, just might, come knocking on her door saying for once that it was for Mrs. Driver.

Sure enough there came an urgent tapping from the corridor. Hastily Cara pushed her clothes under the quilt and opened the door.

'Miss Hirst, a call for you. From London.' Mrs. Stapleton was a little breathless from hurrying. 'I put it through to Mr. Sutherland because I assumed automatically that any call from London would be for him. But it wasn't. It's for you, Miss Hirst.' The words tumbled over each other in her surprise and with a gesture, she urged Cara down the stairs. 'In the hall, Miss Hirst. Do hurry. It must be costing the gentleman an awful lot of money.'

Gentleman? For goodness' sake, she thought, who? Was it her father? But he didn't live in London—unless he was there on business?

She lifted the receiver with shaking fingers. 'Cara Hirst here.'

'Cara, darling! At last. Where the hell did they have to fish you from? The depths of the North Sea? Look, I haven't much time. I'm phoning from a friend's house round the corner from the school. Tomorrow I'm taking a day's leave of absence and--' Here there was a faint click as though someone on another line had just replaced the receiver. It must, Cara thought desperately, be Mrs. Stapleton on her extension making sure she had made contact with the caller. It couldn't, it must not be Shaun!

'Steve!' she said agonisingly. 'How *could* you phone me here? Now they'll know—'

'Toil said no letters, so I phoned. Hell, darling, when a man's been apart from his girl as long as I have, he gets to *needing* to see her. Tomorrow I'm taking unpaid leave and coming north. I'll be up there by noon. I *must* see you. You've got to get away from that old--' He stopped and went on with more discretion, 'From that place if only for a couple of hours. Tell me where I can meet you.'

'Look, Steve,' she glanced around the great hall, up the stairs, in the alcoves, but there was no one lurking there, 'tomorrow Mrs. Driver goes to the hospital for treatment. Afterwards she usually visits a friend and spends the day with her, which means I'm free till the evening, then I'll have to go and get her. Are you listening?'

'With all my ears, darling.'

'A short walk from the village, there's a hotel on the other side of the road from the shore. It's called Islands View Hotel. I'll meet you across the road amongst the sand dunes. I can hide away in them and listen for you.'

'Hide? Why hide if the old girl's miles away?'

'There's the owner—'

'Owner? What owner? Of the hotel?'

'No, idiot. Of this house.'

'Oh, you mean the great--'

She cut him off. 'I keep hearing the pips. You must go, Steve. See you tomorrow. Remember where I said?'

'It's engraved on my heart. Till midday tomorrow, darling.'

'Bye, Steve.'

The phone clicked. Slowly she replaced the receiver. He had called her 'darling'. Why couldn't she bring herself to call him 'darling', too?

At dinner that evening, there was no change in Shaun's behaviour towards Cara, except, she reflected, for one thing. He seemed to be going out of his way to impress on his aunt that his acquaintance with her companion was just a little more than friendly.

Cara, while experiencing a twinge of uneasiness about the hint of familiarity in his attitude towards her, assured herself with immense relief that he must have heard nothing of her conversation with Steven on the telephone. Whoever it was who was listening—it could even have been at Steven's end of the line—had heard nothing of importance. Certainly they did not hear about the arrangements to meet, because the discussion had taken place after she had heard the gende click.

Next morning, alter an early start, Cara left Mrs. Driver at the hospital in the care of a nurse. Since, until now, it had been Shaun who had taken his aunt for her periodic checks and treatment, and since he never had the time to spare to wait until that treatment was over, it was not now expected that Cara should wait.

'My friend comes for me in her car, my dear. It's a large one and my chair will go into it quite easily. This evening she will bring me all the way back. It's usually fairly late, because when I have a day out, I like to make the most of it.' She patted Cara's hand in an unexpectedly affectionate gesture. 'Make the most of your free time, too, Miss Hirst. Enjoy your few hours away from your autocratic and demanding employer.'

Cara laughed, never having guessed that Mrs. Driver could ever be human enough to laugh at herself, nor even confess aloud to her employee that she was aware of her own weaknesses.

It seemed too good to be true, too convenient to be believed. As Cara drove back to Wildsea Castle, she experienced a sense of freedom and release which she thought that only long-imprisoned criminals must feel at the end of their sentence. It was for no more than a few hours, less than a day, in fact, but to her it was like a lifetime stretching beckoningly before her.

Now she could go to meet Steven without any fear of being seen, with no feeling of duty to be done dogging her every movement. Shaun would be too involved with his work to notice her absence. He rarely lunched downstairs, anyway. She would tell Mrs. Stapleton that she had decided to roam the countryside and would not return until evening.

She garaged the car and sped in the back way, disregarding the amused stares of the domestic staff. From her wardrobe she took out the denim pants and button-up top which she had looked at so longingly the day before. Like a small girl at her mother's cosmetics tray, she searched for eye-shadow, lipstick and face powder. For the first time in weeks, the face of a long-lost stranger emerged and stared back at her from the mirror. This was the Cara Hirst she knew and had longed for the world—and especially Shaun Sutherland?—to see.

The difficult part was ahead of her, that of escaping from Wildsea Castle unseen. It was, strangely, more easily achieved than she had dared to anticipate. As she crept down into the hall, there was the sound of chatter from the domestic quarters, but no one emerged to confront her.

The return journey had been so fast and she had changed her clothes so quickly, Cara found herself approaching the sand dunes over an hour too soon. The sense of break-away, of liberation from the shackles of her job was so intense she found herself skipping and turning on the pale sands, throwing her arms about to release the pent-up feelings which had been too long suppressed.

It was a bright, warm summer morning. If there were clouds anywhere in that stretch of blue above, they were white and benign, meaning no harm. Cara ran up one of the dunes, threw herself on to its sandy softness and rolled over and over down to the bottom. She lay panting, smiling, her eyes closed against the golden brilliance of the sun.

Then she stilled, holding her breath, strangely aware of impending disaster. She was not alone any more. Someone had joined her. Was it Steve? An hour too early? Her eyes fluttered open. It was Shaun Sutherland, looking down at her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

How long had he been there? How much had he witnessed of her abandoned delight? He stood, hands on hips, legs stiff and apart, near enough for her to stretch out her sandalled foot and touch him with her toes.

She sat up, her eyes running the length of him, to rest uncertainly on his intimidating expression. 'How—how did you know I was here?'

'I saw you from my room. I also possess a powerful pair of binoculars which I usually use to look over to the islands.' He smiled. 'It's not often I pick up in my sights the leaping, gambolling, lamb-like antics of a slightly crazy female.'

'So,' she had to know, 'so it was pure chance that you saw me?'

He ignored her question as though it had never been asked. He looked her over instead. So close was his examination, so embarrassing was it to feel where his eyes were lingering—and imagining—that she drew the edges of her cardigan top together where it strained away from the buttons.

'When my aunt's away,' he said softly, 'her companion will play. Is that it? Is that why you've taken a chance and abandoned your uniform—strictly against the conditions of your employment, conditions of which you were well aware when you took the job?'

'I took the chance to feel, to *be*, female again. Is that so bad?' Her eyes, seeking his way above her, held appeal. 'There was no one to see—'

'What about me?'

She looked down, drawing circles in the sand. 'You were busy with your writing.'

'So you took a chance on my not seeing you?'

She said nothing. She had indeed staked her all on that, her clandestine meeting with her boy-friend, and her stolen day with him.

Shaun dropped down beside her and it was at that moment that her anxiety began. Less than an hour now to Steven's arrival ...

He rested on his elbow and grasped a handful of white- gold sand, opening his fingers and letting it trickle through slowly, like sand in an egg-timer. Cara could not talk, she dared not engage him in conversation. She must give him no encouragement to remain there. Covertly she glanced at his face. There was a frown, yet the lips were curled into a hint of a smile, as if his thoughts pleased him.

'I could,' he told a fresh handful of sand, 'have you dismissed for this.'

She echoed his frown, but there was fear in her face, not amusement like his. 'Dismissed for what?' Her heart nearly stopped.

He gestured without raising his eyes. 'Those clothes.' A pause and his eyes lifted slowly to her face, scanning it, studying the reddened lips, then the sand had his attention again. 'That make-up.'

She let out her breath. So he didn't know about Steve! But she burst out, 'You wouldn't—you wouldn't be so small-minded!'

There was no mistaking the satisfaction in his smile, like a cat watching the antics of a mouse it was about to kill. 'What,' the sand trickled again, 'would you give me,' the sand had nearly all gone now, 'if I didn't tell my aunt?' He dusted his hands and looked her full in the face. There was no doubt that he was serious.

Cara paled. 'You wouldn't! That's—that's blackmail! You wouldn't be so unscrupulous.'

'Wouldn't I? You really think I wouldn't?'

That was the trouble. She really didn't know. 'Anyway,' she changed the route of the conversation slightly, 'even if you did tell your aunt, she likes me so much she wouldn't dream of dismissing me now for such a trivial thing as wearing my own clothes.'

His eyes, sharp as blades, rested on her. 'I wouldn't count on that. Don't rely too much on my aunt's willingness to forgive and overlook. You should have learned by now that her word is law and if that law is broken, your chances of survival, however much she may have taken to you, would be very much in the balance. I have known her dismiss an employee instantly and without an atom of compunction. If that happened to you, where would your prospects be then of inheriting her fortune?'

His smile taunted. When, she asked herself in agony, would he go away? How much longer now before Steven was due to arrive? She glanced surreptitiously at her watch, but he did not miss the action. 'What are you worried about? The rest of the day, until my aunt returns, is yours. Ours, in fact.'

She stared at him. 'What do you mean?'

'I'll show you.' He stood and his hand came out, inviting her to place hers in it. Stupefied, she did as he wished. He hauled her up beside him. 'You remember I told you I owned a boat and that it was berthed at the jetty in the harbour? I'm using it today to go to the islands. It's a beautiful day, so I'm taking you with me.'

It was shock that made her brain refuse to accept the information it was receiving. How wonderful, it told her, to have the chance of visiting Shaun Sutherland's islands, to spend a few hours entirely alone with him. She was dressed so that her femininity was obvious to even the dullest male eyes ... Then the reality of the situation hit her and she reeled in disbelief.

This could not be happening to her. There was one man on his way to see her, travelling hundreds of miles in order to do so; and another man inviting her—no, insisting, that she should accompany him on a day's outing across the water. *She could not go with him, yet she could not tell him why!*

'I'm—I'm sorry, Mr. Sutherland,' he did not know how truly! 'but I can't go with you.'

She had spoken in as normal a tone of voice as she could manage, yet he did not seem to have heard.

He took her hand, then looked her over. 'Look at you, girl. You're covered in sand.' He dusted her down, brushing the sand from her shoulders and arms, turning her and brushing her back and hips. 'If my aunt could have seen you behaving like a kid of three instead of twenty- three '

She shook her head to free her hair of the clinging yellow dust and—there was no denying it—the feelings his stroking touch aroused. The day was warm and there was a minimum of material to act as a barrier to those male hands skimming the surface of her body.

'I can do it myself,' she said irritably. He stopped at once, looking at her through narrowed eyes. Had she annoyed him? In the circumstances, that was the last thing she wanted to do. 'I'm sorry, I—well, it's not that I object to you touching me, but--' She coloured deeply. Now what had she said?

And was it her imagination, or was there an edge of anger in his response? He tugged her arm. 'Come with me.' The words were spoken curtly, but all the same she held back. She could not go with him! 'I—I don't feel like a trip to the islands.' Another lie, she thought despairingly. It was the one thing in all the world she would have loved to do. If only he had chosen another day!

He stopped and faced her. 'You're feeling ill?'

That was it! She could tell him there was something wrong with her, a headache—anything ...

Before she could speak, he said, eyeing her face, 'I've never seen anyone looking as fit as you do at this moment.' He turned away again, striding back towards the house and pulling her behind him.

It was at that moment that she gave up hope. She threw an agonised glance over her shoulder as if in apology to the absent Steven. If only he would come! In her desperation she even ceased for a moment to care whether he and Shaun met. But then, the small voice of reason murmured, if he did, that would mean the end of everything, of Mrs. Driver, of Wildsea Castle, but most of all, of Shaun.

She lagged behind him all the way, her hand still firmly in his. He motioned her into the car. 'We'll drive to the harbour.'

He parked his car a short distance from the jetty and they walked along its cobbled stones almost to the end. As they went, Cara looked around, pretending an interest in the scenery. In reality she was searching for a fair-haired young man of medium height, looking perhaps a little lost but looking, most of all, along the coast road towards the dunes where he was due to meet a girl called Cara Hirst. Yet here she was, hand in hand with another man!

Tied to the jetty by a stout rope was a motor boat with room for two. Shaun dropped into it and guided Cara down beside him. She made one more attempt to get him to let her go. 'Mr Sutherland, I—I'm a bad sailor.' Which, she thought miserably, was another untruth. 'The motion of the waves--'

'Waves?' he countered. 'What waves? Scarcely a ripple. It's months since I've seen such a calm day.'

As he cast off, Cara watched with anguished eyes. It was only when the gap between the boat and the shore began to increase that it really came to her what she had done. She had left Steven high and dry, alone and unmet in a strange land. He had travelled so far and with such eagerness to see her, yet she had walked out on him with scarcely a show of protest. Although she had to be fair to herself, she reflected. She had done her best, but her hands had been tied. If she had blurted out the truth, she would, this time tomorrow be packing her bags and Mrs. Flora Driver would be seeking the services of yet another companion-help.

It was with blurred eyes that she watched the coastline recede. Poor Steve! Would he ever forgive her?

'Cara, look.' Shaun's raised arm indicated the islands. As the distance between them grew less, so the rocks and islets grew rapidly more awesome. And the nearer they approached, the more appalling the thing she had done became in Cara's tortured mind. Leaving Steven behind, knowing he was there, her watch telling her that he must now be walking towards the hotel, scanning the dunes for her, soon to walk amongst them ...

Hope sprang, like a frail flower in a desert after the first torrential rain for years. Perhaps Shaun did not intend to stay for more than an hour or two. Surely Steven would wait that long? Surely, after that journey, he would not return straight away, reasoning that she must have been delayed at the Castle, or the hospital, by her fractious employer. Yes, that was what would happen, she decided. As soon as Shaun deposited her back on shore, she would excuse herself, saying it was, after all, her first free day for weeks, and he would—he *must*—understand and let her go. Then she would find Steven still waiting.

Sheer from the lapping waters, the rocks rose, grained and grooved by the implacable hand of centuries, by the constant battering and roaring fury of tumultuous seas.

Shaun, seated at the controls, showed an expertise in managing the vessel which could only have come with years of practice. He was in complete command, turning the wheel this way a little, and then that, then steering a straight, undeviating course towards his goal.

As she sat beside him, watching his every movement, Cara reflected that his management of the boat was symbolic of his character. Now that she was beginning to know him—hadn't he kissed her, held her in his arms through the night?—she guessed that, once on a certain course, he would never give up until he had attained his objective. Nothing would side-track him, nothing deflect his determination to get what he wanted.

The speed of the motor boat created its own breeze. Shaun glanced at Cara beside him. Her hair was flying free and her eyes were bright with a pleasure she could not disguise.

'Bad sailor?' he commented. 'Afraid of the sea? You do tell some tales! You're revelling in it, aren't you? There's a colour in your cheeks I've never seen before. Try to tell me now you're sorry you came.' She shook her head, smiling.

Shaun swung the boat in a sweeping arc and made for the western side of the main island. There was a small area of land which was level enough for Shaun to beach the boat. He made the rope fast to a post which seemed to

have been placed there for that purpose. He offered his hand to Cara and the stones and sand were damp underfoot, but the fact passed her by in the awe with which her surroundings filled her.

'These islands,' said Shaun, still holding her fingers loosely and guiding her up the beach, 'are the home of one of the largest colonies of seabirds around the British coast. You don't even have to search for them, or use binoculars. As you can see, they're all around you.' He pressed her fingers and pointed. 'A guillemot. And there's a kittiwake. Over there is a razorbill. And away over there, on the northernmost island is the lighthouse which no doubt with its flashes keeps you awake at night—when your conscience isn't doing so, of course.' He smiled down at her, but she tensed. What did he mean? Or was there no meaning in the words, just the joke they appeared to be on the surface?

'What,' he said, 'no wakefulness because of the flashes, or no conscience?'

'No conscience,' she joked back, and became aware—or had she imagined it?—of the faintest hardening of his smile.

He looked about him, eyes slitted against the sun which shone from a cloudless sky and danced and sparkled on the unbelievably calm waters surrounding them. He pulled her gently. 'We'll climb a bit.'

So they climbed, stepping cautiously on the slippery rocks from which the wetness never seemed completely to evaporate. Seaweed clung, too, making the going hazardous. At every step they took, a bird fluttered away, but never very far, as though regarding the presence of human beings a nuisance to be tolerated without fear.

Now and then Cara glanced across at the mainland. Every time she did so her anguish returned. She could picture Steven waiting, pacing the sand, growing more upset as every empty minute passed. Then her conscience really would trouble her and she would look up at the man beside her. He stared ahead, however, anticipating each footstep both for himself and for her, completely unaware of the tumult which was rising and falling like a stormy sea in the breast of the young woman at his side.

,The tranquillity of the place stole into her, soothing her mind and body until she almost came to believe that this was what she had been destined to do since the day began—not to meet Steven Griffiths on the dunes near Islands View Hotel, but to stroll hand in hand with Shaun Sutherland on his rugged, rocky haven.

'How long are we staying?' she asked, straining to sound unperturbed.

He shrugged. 'For as long as the fancy takes me.'

Her heart sank. 'But—but what about lunch?'

'Stowed away on the boat. I got Mrs. Stapleton to pack a hamper last night and I took it down in my car.'

'So you had it all planned?'

'Yes.' He looked down at her. 'You sound annoyed.'

'Without,' she choked, 'without consulting me?'

'Was there any reason why I should? You came willingly, after a few coy attempts at resistance.'

'You gave me no chance.'

'I gave you every chance. If you really hadn't wanted to come, I wouldn't have insisted.'

She was silent.

'You see, you can't deny it. Now,' he indicated a grassy incline, 'up there is a plateau. A few years back I built myself a hut of wood brought over from the mainland, together with boulders and rocks collected from the island. Consider yourself honoured. I allow only the chosen few in my hide-away.'

She went with him, feeling his steadying hand when she slipped and slithered on damp patches of rock and mud-based grass. The hut was

roughly built, but care had been taken to ensure against the penetration of wind and rain. There was a window, an oil heater, a desk littered with papers and, strangely incongruous in such surroundings, a typewriter. There were facilities, too, for heating water and for cooking simple meals. A folding bed stood in a corner.

'Whenever I feel anti-social, or the need for total solitude, I come here. Somehow the isolation loosens my thoughts, lets the words flow. The pictures in my mind are much more vivid out here, all my senses are heightened. And,' softly, 'when I have an attractive young woman with me—rare indeed—even more so. So beware, Cara Hirst. You're at my mercy. There's nowhere to run, except into the sea.'

She met his smile with a tremulous one of her own. Behind his words was a shadow of truth that frightened her. At his mercy—her pulses leapt, when they should have throbbed with fear. Nowhere to run, but—she had to face it—she did not want to run from him!

His eyes were on her and she asked, 'What are you thinking?'

'That I'm—I'm hungry,' she fabricated, and he laughed.

'That wasn't what was in your mind, was it? But I'll take the hint. Let's make our way back to the boat. We'll eat and then, who knows? Soak up the sun while we've got the chance.'

'But, Shaun,' she failed to hide her anxiety and hoped he would interpret it as worry about his aunt, 'I must get back. We—I can't stay too long. I—I have things to do.'

'Nothing that can't wait until this evening.' He locked the hut and walked her back to the beach.

They shared a lunch of sandwiches, fresh fruit and coffee. Afterwards they lay back, an arm's length from each other. Shaun, to Cara's relief, seemed content to let it stay that way. His fingers worried the buttons of his shirt until they were all undone, then he pushed the material aside, letting the sun's rays deepen the tan on his body.

Cara, turning her head covertly, saw the hard build of him, felt the tug at her responses that was almost impossible to resist. She remembered the feel of his body as he had cradled her to sleep that night in the library. There was already an intimacy between them which, had she received the slightest encouragement, the merest hint that he remembered she was there, would have broken down her natural reserve and drawn her, magnet-like, to curl up at his side.

But he lay with his eyes closed, perfectly at peace. A well of resentment founded inside her that he could ignore her so. Her hands strayed to the buttons on her ribbed top. He was not looking, so why should she not soak up the sun as he was doing? Surreptitiously her fingers undid one, two buttons and immediately the material sprang away and she felt the warmth beat down, a warmth from which, until then, her skin had been shielded.

Then guilt overcame her as a picture formed in her mind of a young man striding about on those dunes which, if she strained her eyes, she could just see outlined across at the mainland. Her watch told her that she was already two hours overdue, but she knew Steve would not easily give in. If, in desperation, he called at the house, there would only be Mrs. Stapleton there to tell him—what? That she had beer called away?

She sat up and her eyes scanned the coastline. Did she, she reflected ruefully, think that by doing so she could see Steven and somehow send him a message, like a sailor using semaphore?

'Sit down. Relax,' Shaun growled.

'I can't. Mr. Suth--' His head lifted, eyes reprimanding. 'Shaun—we must go soon. Mustn't we?' From a positive statement her voice had turned into appeal.

By his lazy silence she knew her appeal had been dismissed.

She lay back, her fingers feeling for pebbles and dropping them down again. 'Shaun?' He made a movement. 'I know it sounds a strange question, but—have you really never been married, not even in the distant past?'

He seemed first surprised by her query, then amused. 'You're surely not completely so naive as you look when you're wearing that ridiculous uniform? I told you,' he drawled, 'I never let a woman "catch" me. I only let her think she has. Let me say in answer that,' he seemed to be choosing his words, 'I have never stood before a registrar with a woman and taken marriage vows. I've never had in my possession a marriage certificate.' He added dryly, 'There simply has never been any necessity. Need I say more?'

'No,' she snapped.

'Sorry if I've spoilt your girlish illusions of my innocence.'

'I'm a woman,' she responded childishly, 'not a girl.'

He raised his head, lifting an amused eyebrow. 'Are you?' His eyes scanned her, resting momentarily on the partially unbuttoned top. Her hand went involuntarily to cover her bared skin and he laughed. 'See what I mean.'

She cursed herself for her instinctive action.

'You—you know so much about women.'

'I do. It's my trade. I have to know about people's feelings in order to write about them. It's a combination of observation, experience and intuition. Plus many other things, of course.' He rolled on to his side. The movement brought him dangerously close. 'Have I satisfied your curiosity?'

'Yes, thanks,' she responded crisply, turning her head away in a desperate attempt to discourage him.

Gulls circled and their winsome cries stirred strange echoes in her heart. There were other bird cries, too, which she had never heard before. The sea, benevolent and gentle, sent off sparks towards a blue-gold sky, soothing and washing clean the minds and consciences of those who bore mental burdens—people like me, Cara thought, who had one man fretting the hours away on the shore awaiting her arrival, and another here on the island lying enigmatically at her side.

But that conscience, snake-like, turned its head and struck. Its poison raced through her and the thought of what she had done—let Steven Griffiths down so abominably he might never forgive her—had her on her feet.

'I'm going back, Shaun,' she said, hearing the panic in her voice instead of the decision she had intended to infuse into the words. 'If you won't take me, I'll go on my own.'

'Tell me,' he rose lazily into a sitting position, 'how do you propose to get back to the mainland? Swim?'

'No. I'll take your boat. *You'll* have to swim.'

She had meant it only as a threat and started to move away, hoping he would follow, so she was entirely unprepared for what happened. He half rose, grabbing her anywhere he could find a hold. She found her cardigan top pulled from the belt of her jeans and she went down under the strength of the hand that imprisoned her.

She was back on the ground, sprawling full-length. He was leaning over her, his hands forcing her arms back and above her head. His bare chest pressed against her and her legs were pinned by his. He laughed down into her face, his eyes blazing with triumph.

'You've had it coming,' he said, 'a long, long time.'

'Let me go!' she stormed. 'You've no right to keep me here against my will.'

'Between a man and a woman, where the passions are concerned, what do *rights* matter? Come on, my fiery island mate, provoke me, arouse me. Remember the femininity you've buried fathoms deep all these weeks. Rediscover it like a lost and priceless pirates' hoard from the depths of the ocean. Come on, girl, flaunt it in front of me, make me want you as a real man wants an attractive, desirable woman.'

'I wouldn't know,' she said between her teeth, squirming and writhing under the pressure of him. 'I'm unattractive, undesirable. I'm *plain*—you've told me that. I *repel* you--'

'This, my girl, is how much you repel me.' Under the pull of his hand as he had reached out to grab her and tug her down, other buttonholes on her top had come adrift. This his glinting eyes perceived and his lips descended against her warm flesh, bringing stinging colour to her cheeks.

He released her hands and she put them on each side of his head in a vain attempt to push him away. He paused, smiled mockingly and said, 'Do you want me to stop?'

'Yes, yes,' she breathed, fighting the wave of desire which swept her reflexes with unbelievable treachery. 'Of course you must stop. I told you, I refuse to let a man--'

'My sweet Cara, you've slept in my arms. When I offered you a refuge on the settee in my library, you didn't push me away then.'

She closed her eyes. 'But I said "no" then, didn't I? And I meant it.'

He rolled on to his side, releasing her. 'You want to go? You want to run from me?'

To her everlasting humiliation, she did not move a muscle. He had given her a chance, if only for a few seconds, to bring the lovemaking to an end. But she adored this man—a truth that hit her so hard it was like two space ships colliding in her brain—so how could she run away from him?

Daringly she cupped his face. 'Shaun,' she whispered, 'oh, Shaun ...'

'By heaven,' he said softly, 'a man needs no more encouragement than that.' He closed in on her again. 'Don't ever say,' he murmured thickly against her throat, 'that I didn't give you a chance.'

He ran his hand through her hair, letting its silky softness fall through his fingers. 'Don't get it cut again, whatever my aunt might say. Let it grow.' He curled it to meet under her chin, framing her face, then he kissed the features of that face one by one.

Moments went by, moments of ecstasy interwoven with a creeping sense of guilt. Into her muddled mind came the image of Steven, fretting and fuming over on the mainland. Yet she was lying here with abandoned, wild joy, allowing Shaun to make passionate love to her as if she were his, promised to him in marriage.

It would not have been so bad, she need not have reproached herself so furiously, if there had been any chance of his returning her feelings. Hadn't she known from the start that to him she was a mere diversion, that he was acting out of curiosity to see how it felt to make love to the 'forbidden fruit' of his aunt's companion-help? To how many other employees of his aunt had he whispered such heart-melting endearments, how many had he brought to vibrant life with his experienced hands?

As his fingers found the fastening of the belt around her waist, she cried out in anguish, 'No, Shaun, no!'

With a strength she was not even aware of possessing, she struggled with him with a fierce compelling violence. But he had violence and more to match and conquer hers. He imprisoned her hands again, and as he looked down into her flushed face, all the warmth and passion had been wiped clean from his expression.

'What if I persist?' he rasped. 'What if I carry on and take what you have so curiously and so suddenly decided to deny me, when all along by your responses to my love- making you've been saying, "yes, yes?"'

'I would scream if you did,' she cried, 'I'd scream, like this--'

Her mouth opened, but not a sound came out. Instead his descended and explored and she was lost again. Then he lifted his head and saw the tears.

Without pity he watched as the high colour in her cheeks receded, leaving her pale and drained.

He had not finished with her. In fact, he had only just begun. As her will to continue the fight seeped out of her, so his increased. He stood and pulled

her with him, swinging her to face him, and his merciless cross-examination began.

'Let's be done with play-acting,' he rasped. 'Drop the pretence, drop the lies and secrecy and *tell me the truth*. What's his name? What is the name of this young man you're in love with, to whom you've been writing letters and talking to on the phone in public callboxes? This man to whom you are—you must be—engaged to be married?'

She whispered unbelievably, aghast, 'You know about him?'

'I've known about him since before I interviewed you. The room I was occupying in that London hotel overlooked the side street he parked in. I saw the kiss he gave you for courage, the kisses afterwards in congratulation.'

A shaking hand nursed her dry throat. All that time he knew? And the lies she had told, pretending it was her father!

'How have you felt, all day long,' he taunted brutally, 'being incarcerated on an island with me, when all the time he's been waiting for you over there? And all the time you've been aching to get across that water to meet him as you arranged on the telephone yesterday?'

'You listened in on our conversation!' she cried, hoping to turn the tide of anger from herself to him. But she failed.

'No, I did not listen in. My ethics are a damned sight better than yours. The call was put through to me first because when my housekeeper heard it was from London, she automatically concluded that it was for me. I merely hung on until I knew you were connected on another extension. I could hardly help hearing the first few sentences. Your loved one was in such a hurry to get his words out, spilling over as he was with his desire to make contact with you. He was taking a day's leave of absence, he said, at which point I put the receiver down.'

'If that's true,' she said accusingly, 'how did you know where to find me this morning?'

He said coldly, letting her go, 'You're accusing *me* of lying now? Don't attribute to other people failings which your own character possesses. I'll tell you how I knew. After hearing that piece of conversation, I used my imagination. It didn't need much. This morning I watched you leave the house and followed your progress along the shore by using my binoculars.' He smiled sarcastically. 'The way you threw yourself about, the joy with which you anticipated the coming of your fiance was an incredible sight to behold.'

'You're so wrong! It was because I was happy--'

'Of course you were happy. You were going to meet your beloved, weren't you? Or so you thought. I had other plans. Thinking about it,' he looked her over cruelly, 'it was surprisingly easy to persuade you to accompany me over here.'

'You forced me to go with you. You didn't give me a chance to refuse. I tried to say "no", but--'

'Yes,' he sneered, 'you're very good at that, aren't you?'

So far,' he looked at her clothes, still dishevelled from the passionate interlude, 'and no farther. But you must admit, you didn't try very hard to stop me. You came docilely enough to the harbour in the car.'

Of course I did! she longed to cry. Because deep down I wanted to go with you.

'However,' he went on, 'I was determined to get you away, to stop you keeping your assignation.'

'But—but why?'

'Why?' His anger whipped into life. 'To punish you, to keep you in suspense, in agony, knowing he was there, and you were here, with a large portion of sea between you both which you couldn't cross without my assistance.'

Her lip quivered and she bit it fiercely. 'What have I done wrong? I haven't committed any crime. If you thought so badly of me, why have you—kissed me and let me sleep in your arms? And—and just now, you made love to me--' She gazed up at him seeking understanding, but his expression was implacable.

'I'll tell you why. I've been testing you, and now I've proved something else to myself about you. That you're faithless, untrustworthy and liberal with your favours. You're engaged to one man, yet this afternoon, you not only tolerated the lovemaking of another, but you eagerly let him do so with hardly a word in protest.'

'But don't you understand? That's because I--'

Those moments in your arms, she wanted to say, they meant all the world to me. I wanted to feel your caresses and kisses so that one day, when I go, I shall at least have those to remember.

He showed impatience at her silence. He didn't want to wait to hear something she could not tell him anyway. What was the use of loving this man? What use *telling* him of her love? He would laugh in her face.

'Because--?' he prompted coldly.

'Because,' she invented, 'I—I couldn't stop you. You're stronger than I am and--'

'My dear Cara, a man knows when a girl's willing and when she isn't. And my word, you were willing! You, who posed the innocent at the interview. Right from the start you've tried to fool me, wearing that incredible outfit the day we met, trying to disguise your...' his eyes wandered insultingly, 'your attractions in order to get the job. You've consistently deceived and misled both my aunt and myself. You've behaved with despicable dishonesty from the very beginning, even, in effect from the moment you answered the advertisement. You were engaged, yet at the interview you denied even having a boy-friend, let alone a fiancée. I told you once that I respected honesty above all things. How can I respect anyone who has been such a blatant liar from the moment of our meeting?'

She sank down. 'I wanted the job,' she whispered, 'because the money was good. Steven and I needed it to buy a house. I'd given up my job. I was no good at anything else, so although it meant us being apart, we agreed that I'd work for your aunt until we'd saved enough between us.'

'Until,' his voice was biting, 'she promised you her fortune on her death if you stayed the course, which was when you decided between you to dispense with the formalities of a marriage ceremony and indulge in a secret affair.'

'That's not true! Today would have been the first time we had met since I started working for your aunt.'

'So today would have been the day the affair began?'

She sprang up to face him. 'No, it wouldn't! Don't, as you said to me just now, attribute to others faults which you've got yourself.' A muscle twitched in his cheek. 'He was coming to see me because he said he—needed to see me--' She stopped as triumph gleamed in his eyes.

' "Needed." Thank you for proving my point.'

'It's your mind,' she stormed, goaded into abuse at his totally wrong assumption, 'your twisting, distorted mind that's giving you these warped ideas. You said you liked the truth. Well, I don't believe you. You won't even listen to the truth!'

He grew as pale as she was. 'Thanks for telling me how highly you think of me. "Twisting, distorting, warped." I shall carry those words engraved on my heart.'

'Heart? You haven't got one. There's a—a--' She looked around, finding to her dismay that everything had become blurred. 'There's a *lighthouse* where your heart should be, flashing warnings, like that one over there, telling everyone to keep away or come close at their peril.' A sob escaped her and she flopped down on to the ground again.

She thought, rubbing away the tears with her hand, Can't he see I didn't really mean what I said? Doesn't he understand how much I admire and respect him? Counted myself lucky he's even noticed me, let alone talked to me, kissed me and even, though for the wrong reasons, found me tolerable enough to make love to me?

'You might as well stop crying,' he said coolly, fastening the front of his shirt and tucking it back into place. 'It doesn't move me in the least. You won't be seeing your fiance today.'

Was that why he thought she was crying? Because of missing Steven? She looked up. 'Why not? There's still time. He's probably over there waiting, thinking I've been delayed by your aunt.' Why was she pressing him? She didn't care if she didn't see Steven.

'Because, my sour-tongued Miss Cara Hirst, we're staying here on this island until I'm absolutely sure your sadly deprived lover has taken himself back to London.'

'But your aunt will be back soon. I *must* be there when she arrives or--'

'Or she might dismiss you? Then where would you be,' he taunted, 'without her fortune to carry you and your husband-to-be through the rest of your lives?'

'I was thinking,' she said, wearying of trying to kindle any understanding in him, 'that she'll need me.'

'So that's someone else who "needs" you?' he murmured sarcastically. 'Thank heaven I'm not one of them!' He gestured towards her cardigan top. 'Hadn't you better make yourself decent?'

She flushed. She had forgotten those unfastened buttons.

He moved away towards the boat. Was he going to leave her there? She stood up in fear. 'Where are you going?'

'Don't worry,' he mocked. 'I'm coming back. I'm getting something to eat. There's a sandwich or two left over from lunch.'

She watched him dully as he made his way down to the boat. He returned with the hamper and threw open the lid. He took out a plastic box and offered her a sandwich, but she turned her head away. 'I'm not hungry.'

He shrugged, extracted one and bit into it, stretching out and supporting himself on his elbow. He looked about him, ignoring her as if he were alone. All that passion he had shown and those endearments he had whispered might have been enacted in her imagination, a scene from one of his books—but with an unhappy ending.

He offered her some coffee. She shook her head resolutely, trying to quell the urge to accept, to moisten her dry mouth and fill her emptiness with the food which, out of pique, she was denying herself. As he took the last sandwich and bit into it, she watched him hungrily and their eyes happened to meet. He paused, thought a moment and looked at her again. He must have seen the hunger in her eyes, but he seemed to close his mind to the mute appeal. He finished the sandwich to the last crumb.

Time passed and daylight began to fade. The air grew chill. 'I'm cold,' she said miserably. 'Can't we go now? I expect he's gone.'

'Not if I know a young Romeo. He's hanging on like a man clinging to the edge of a rock.'

'I haven't g-got a c-coat,' she moaned.

It was as if he hadn't heard. He stared out to sea, lost to the world. If only, she thought, he would come over to me, put his arm round me, keep me warm ... She began to shiver uncontrollably. 'Please,' she whispered, '*please* take me back.'

He got up at last, gathered their belongings and said curtly, 'Follow me.'

It did not take long to cross to the mainland. Shaun tied up the boat and helped Cara out on to the cobbled stones of the jetty. On the way back, Cara

did not even attempt to look out into the twilight to search for Steven. He would have gone long ago. He never was a patient person and had probably left the village after only a few hours.

To Cara's dismay, Shaun did not drive straight home. He swung the car into the forecourt of the hotel and told her to get out.

'But your aunt,' she protested. 'I must get back.'

'We'll have a drink.' He held open the passenger door.

With reluctance she followed him into the hotel reception area. Valerie Pendle, behind the desk, extended her arms in welcome. 'You've neglected me, Shaun,' she said winningly, then saw Shaun's companion. Her smile became a frown. 'I'm sorry,' she said flatly. 'You have a friend with you.'

'Hardly a friend, Valerie.' Thus lightly, Cara thought unhappily, did he dismiss her. 'Let me introduce,' Shaun said, grinning, 'my aunt's companion.'

'Of course!' Valerie gazed at her with astonishment. 'I didn't recognise her. What have you done to her, Shaun?' she queried archly.

'Let me assure you, Valerie—nothing, absolutely nothing. We want a drink. And a sandwich. Miss Hirst is hungry.'

'I'm not!'

'Lying again, Miss Hirst?' he murmured silkily.

Valerie looked with interest from one to the other. 'I see what you mean about not "touching" her, Shaun,' she said with a smile. 'You hate each other's guts.'

'That's putting it a little strongly,' Shaun murmured. 'My feelings where Miss Hirst are concerned are so neutral they simply haven't registered. Talking of registering,' he pulled the hotel register towards him, 'has anyone by the name of--?' He looked inquiringly at Cara, but she closed her lips defiantly.

'Steven Griffiths?' Valerie prompted. 'No, he didn't book in. He merely asked if I knew the whereabouts of a Miss Cara Hirst. I said as far as I knew, she was an employee of Mrs. Driver's at Wildsea Castle and was in residence there. He said he'd phoned the castle and had been told by the housekeeper that Miss Hirst was out for the day. The trouble was, he said, she was supposed to have been out with him. He seemed annoyed, Miss Hirst. He stayed for lunch and stalked out.' She looked at Shaun. 'Do you still want your drink?'

'Even more,' he responded with a taunting smile directed at Cara. He named the drinks they required. 'We'll have it here. We'll drink a toast. When it comes—bring one for yourself, Valerie—I'll tell you the subject of that toast. Oh, and--' he motioned towards Cara, 'don't forget that sandwich. Any preference, Miss Hirst?' She glared at him and he shrugged.

While Valerie Pendle was away, a guest wandered in and gazed at the leaflets and photographs on the notice board. The woman's presence made conversation between Cara and her companion impossible. When Valerie returned, holding a tray, the woman guest asked her a question which was soon answered and she melted away.

Shaun took a glass and gave another to Cara. She could not refuse without causing a scene—yet another scene—in front of the hotel proprietor's daughter.

'It's a simple toast,' said Shaun. To the vanquished.'

Cara did not lift her glass to her lips until the other two had drunk, thus signifying her refusal to share the toast. When Shaun offered her the sandwich, she took it only because she feared the results of drinking on an empty, rumbling stomach.

To Cara's relief, they did not stay long at the hotel. It seemed that Shaun had been given the information for which he had come. He could, if he wished, have had a drink in his own home and in much greater comfort.

Flustered by the lateness of the hour, Cara raced up the steps and was followed closely by Shaun. She had hoped to slip upstairs, change quickly

and race down again as though she had been on the premises all the time. But her plans went wrong.

As they pushed through the entrance doors, they found Mrs. Driver in her wheelchair in the centre of the hall. Her face was scarlet. When she saw that Cara was dressed in her own clothes, with her nephew close behind; when she saw that nephew's hand lift casually and rest on Cara's trembling shoulder, the colour in her face deepened, making Cara afraid for her.

'What have you done to her, Shaun?' Mrs. Driver demanded shrilly. 'Have you--?' She could not bring herself to speak the words. 'You haven't--?' There was a note of fear, of pleading almost, behind the unfinished question.

'No, Aunt, I haven't. She's whole and untouched,' his eyes taunted Cara, 'at least, in the respect you mean.'

With a look of relief, Mrs. Driver turned her attention to her employee. 'What are you doing, Miss Hirst, in *those* clothes? I thought I forbade you *ever*, while in my employ, to wear anything but your uniform? You have broken the rule

Was this the end? In a way, it might have been a relief, Cara thought tiredly. 'It was my day off, Mrs. Driver. I thought that just for once you wouldn't mind.'

Mrs. Driver must have heard the note of hopelessness because she said, a little less sharply, 'Go upstairs and change back into your uniform. Then come down and attend to my needs. That's what I pay you for, Miss Hirst, to obey my orders.'

Cara could not suppress a sigh. Mrs. Driver had turned her chair and had missed it, but Shaun had heard—and felt—the sigh. His hand still lingered on Cara's shoulder.

She jerked away. 'It's all your fault,' she reproached, her eyes on fire. 'You kept me prisoner--' Mrs. Driver was too far away to hear the accusation.

Shaun's smile held no humour. 'I didn't spoil you for your husband-to-be. At least thank me for that. I could so easily have done so, because you were such a willing partner in what took place between us. No, on second thoughts, I have to have *some* respect for the woman I lie with, otherwise in my eyes she'd be no better than a--'

Cara swung her hand, but he caught her wrist in midair.

'Shaun,' his aunt called from the other end of the hall, 'I wish to talk to you.'

Cara raced away, taking the stairs two at a time.

It did not take long to change. The make-up had nearly all disappeared anyway, and after a quick wash, Cara ran a comb through her hair—the hair in which Shaun, in the midst of his lovemaking, had buried his face. Don't have it cut, he had said, even if his aunt ordered her to do so. The thought of the tender passion in his face as he had looked down at her turned her legs to water, only to tense again as she thought of all that had happened since those ecstatic moments.

As she made her way down the stairs and across the hall, she heard voices raised, but not in argument. Shaun, it seemed, had found something amusing in what his aunt had said. He was laughing, but it was a laugh Cara had heard so many times before. It was cynical and hard and the words that followed had her pausing, hand on the door.

'Why did you invite Ginni here, Aunt?'

'To take your mind off my companion. It might give you a sense of satisfaction to seduce her, young man, just to prove to yourself that no woman can resist your charms and your handsome face, but it would deprive me of the best employee I've ever had. So leave her alone, Shaun, leave her alone!'

Shaun's laughter rang out and Cara's hand trembled on the door handle. It rattled a little, but she knew that neither of the two people inside that room could have been aware of it, so absorbed were they in their conversation.

'You're not implying,' Shaun said, with astonishment in his voice, 'that I'm interested in—*attracted by*—Cara Hirst? My dear aunt, a man would have to be desperate for a woman to feel the faintest stirrings of desire for such an under-sexed, over-educated, overgrown schoolgirl as she is.'

There was a grunt of satisfaction from his aunt. 'Good. I'm delighted to hear she repels you. That was my intention when I made those rules and regulations about uniform and make-up.'

Cara, head high, face pale and expressionless, walked in. Involuntarily her glance went straight to Shaun, who returned her look with a careless smile. He looked he; over, inspecting her shapelessness, her lace-up shoes, and distaste curled the corners of his mouth. Her lips trembled and she had to press them fiercely together to stop the tears which his humiliating glance had provoked. 'An overgrown schoolgirl', he had called her. So now she knew what he really thought of her, despite all that had taken place between them. Never, she vowed, would she let him know her feelings for *him*!

CHAPTER NINE

It was next day that Ginni Ravenga made her entrance. As Shaun met her on the doorstep, she flung her arms round his neck.

The woman was all that Cara had guessed. Her hair was fair, fairer than Cara's and groomed to shining perfection. She was slender and tall, only a little below Shaun's towering height.

Yes, Cara thought miserably, as she stood at the top of the staircase watching the arrival, they make a good pair, Shaun Sutherland and his girl-friend. Ginni Ravenga's eyes, a pale grey, were as hard as his. The expression, as her head lifted and she saw Cara, was as insulting and dismissive.

Only a servant, Cara was sure she was thinking, an employee of that eccentric old lady who is my dear Shaun's aunt.

Ginni touched Shaun's arm and indicated Cara as she stood rigidly above them. 'Who, in heaven's name, is that creature, darling? And which decade has she stepped from? The early nineteen hundreds? She's surely not your aunt's latest acquisition?'

Shaun's sarcastic smile brought the colour to Cara's pale cheeks and a fighting glint to her eyes. She would not stand there as if she were deaf and stupid. She would not let herself be insulted by any woman, even if that woman was the great Shaun Sutherland's intimate friend.

So Cara came a few steps down, gripping the polished banister. There was fire in her eyes as she said, 'The uniform is not of my choice, Miss Ravenga. It goes with the job. And, for your information, I'm strictly late twentieth century not only in my outlook and thought processes, but in my mode of dress—when I'm allowed to be.' Her eyes shifted. 'Am I dismissed, Mr Sutherland?'

Her anger spent, she quaked inside. She had provoked and incited like a matador in a bullring. Was this the end of her stay in Wildsea Castle?

Ginni looked petulantly at her companion. 'Well, go on, Shaun, fire her. Or do you always stand by and allow a servant to insult your guests ?'

'My dear Ginni,' his arm rested round her waist, 'she's not my employee. It's hardly within my power to send her packing,' his eyes narrowed as they settled on the subject of their conversation, 'much as I should like to sometimes.'

'She's hardly the usual simpering type of female your aunt acquires as a companion, is she, darling?' Those grey eyes, a little less certain now, settled on Cara's face. They held both a hint of puzzlement and of curiosity.

'No,' Shaun replied. 'Her real line is teaching. For some reason I haven't yet discovered, she opted out and abandoned her career.'

'A teacher? Heaven help the poor students,' Ginni said, turning to Shaun and putting her hands on his shoulders, and plainly dismissing the companion-help from her mind. She gazed into Shaun's face. 'I've got lots of ideas for our next play, darling. I'm so glad your aunt asked me here. I'd have waited for ever for you to ask me.'

His answer was surprisingly cool. 'I prefer to be in London when we collaborate on a play. I find the atmosphere here is right for a novel, but wrong for drama.'

Ginni laughed up into his eyes. 'What funny little quirks you do have, Shaun. They say it goes with the creative temperament.'

Shaun did not return her laughter. Instead he looked up the stairs and said curtly, 'I should be obliged if you would stop eavesdropping on our conversation, Miss Hirst.'

Colouring furiously, Cara turned and scampered along the landing, away from the humiliation he had once again forced on her. How could she have been so foolish as to linger and watch the subtle byplay between Ginni Ravenga and her man friend—a strangely aloof man friend, Cara reflected. No doubt he had been inhibited by his audience of one, especially as he had

played his part as amorous lover so convincingly only the day before with that particular 'audience'.

Before dinner that evening Ginni stood, glass in hand, by Shaun's side. Her other hand was linked possessively round Shaun's arm. As Cara entered the room, walking beside her employer's wheelchair, Ginni looked on in disbelief. Her eyes lifted to Shaun's as if to say, 'Is that creature joining us for dinner?'

Although Cara shared the meal, she took no part in the conversation. As no one addressed her, she therefore addressed no one. Now and then Cara found Ginni's eyes upon her, but she returned the stare boldly and, to Cara's amazement and triumph, the grey eyes always dropped first.

Shaun, she knew, was not unaware of the silent battle. Now and then Cara caught him smiling, but whether it was with amusement at something Ginni had said, or whether he was amused by the way the two women seemed, in a curiously primitive way, to be fighting over him, Cara could not tell.

That evening, Cara wrote to Steven. Mere words on a piece of paper could not, she knew, make up for what she had done to him. Only personal contact could -heal the wounds the breaking of her promise had inflicted.

How feeble it sounded to say, 'Shaun Sutherland insisted on taking me with him, and there was nothing I could do to stop him.' Looking back, she realised there must have been something she could have done—obstinately refused to go, for instance. Or even, she thought, run away, although, she reflected ruefully, with his long legs and athletic frame, he would easily have caught her—as, in fact, he had done before.

She hoped her letter would soothe and placate, because for the moment the personal contact she had thought of was out of the question. Not even could their voices meet by means of the telephone. She could not risk having any more calls for her from London wrongly directed to the owner of the house!

Mrs. Driver had taken to spending part of the afternoon in the library, listening to Cara reading to her. It was not usually a time of day that Shaun

used for working. The following afternoon, however, Mrs. Driver said to her nephew,

'I suppose you'll be altering your habits now Ginni is here to work with you? In which case, during the course of her visit, I shall, with your permission, merely borrow a book from your collection and have Miss Hirst read it to me in my room.'

Ginni said, before Shaun could reply, 'Oh, Shaun darling, don't let's throw your aunt's routine out like that. Let her use the library. We can work perfectly well in your room," can't we?' Her eyes rounded as she gazed at him, and Shaun could not have failed to read her message.

However, he replied as if she had not spoken, 'That's obliging of you, Aunt. If it's not putting you out?' His raised eyebrows brought from his aunt an immediate assurance that it was not.

It was after Mrs. Driver's rest that she discovered that the book Cara was currently reading aloud had been left in the library. Mrs. Driver reprimanded her for what she termed Cara's 'absent-mindedness' and said she did not know what had come over her companion-help lately.

Cara's heart sank. Was her unhappy state of mind revealing itself in unexpected ways? Had even her very self-centred employer noticed a lessening in her attention to duty?

'Go and get it, Miss Hirst,' Mrs. Driver directed with a sigh, 'and remember to apologise sincerely for the interruption.'

Cara was not to know, as she knocked and walked in, just what she was interrupting. Shaun was sitting in the chair at his desk, but he had swivelled it round to face the woman who stood beside him. He was laughing up at her and her hands were on his shoulders. At the moment of Cara's entry they were oblivious to everything but themselves. Then Ginni moved—whether she was pulled or manoeuvred it herself, Cara was unable to tell—and collapsed on to Shaun's lap.

She rested against his shoulder as if exhausted with laughing. Then she became still, sensing another's presence. Her head shot round and Shaun followed her gaze. He, curiously, did not seem surprised to see the intruder, but he was certainly very annoyed indeed.

'What are you doing here?' He pushed Ginni away and stood to face Cara. 'Kindly remove yourself from this library.'

Her face scarlet, both with embarrassment at having witnessed the intimate scene and with an excruciating jealousy, she replied, 'I was told to come here by your aunt. I've come for the book I inadvertently left behind. I was also told to apologise sincerely for the interruption.' Unflinchingly she returned his furious gaze and said tonelessly, 'I apologise sincerely for the interruption.'

He breathed heavily for a moment as if restraining himself from striding across and striking her. Cara was puzzled by his anger. What did it matter if she had seen their playfulness and sensed the intimacy that existed between them?

'Get the book and get out!' he commanded.

It lay on a low table at the other end of the library. Cara's instinct was to run, grab the book and race out. Instead, she walked the distance with dignity, bent to retrieve the book and retraced her steps to the door.

There she turned, her head high and said, 'Thank you, Mr. Sutherland. I'm sincerely sorry I interrupted your— work.' The pause was deliberate but the effect completely unforeseen. By her impertinent manner she had goaded him, it seemed, beyond endurance. He was across the room and gripping her arms until she gritted her teeth with pain. He pushed her into the next room and shut the door in her face. She was forced to walk away with the sound of Ginni's delighted laughter ringing in her ears.

It was shortly before dinner that Shaun caught Cara coming out of his aunt's living-room. Cara thought it was his intention to castigate her once again for

her intrusion into the library. Even as he addressed her, she inched her way round him.

'Miss Hirst,' he said, and she broke into a run, making for the stairs. But they were so far away and he was so quick in his pursuit of her, he had her wrist before she was half-way across the hall.

'Oh, no,' he said, 'you're not performing your scampering mouse act again, my girl. I wonder, do you ever stand still and face the truth?'

Once she had done just that—when she had recognised her failure as a teacher and resigned from her job. It had hurt her so much she had vowed always, in the future, to run away and if necessary, never to stop running again.

'What do you want?' she asked belligerently.

'To tell you that the sight of you in your uniform across the dinner table so upsets Miss Ravenga's sensitive, artistic nature--' Was he, she wondered, being sarcastic?

She could not tell from his impassive face. 'She has,' he continued, 'requested me either to ask my aunt to let you dine alone in your room,' Cara's eyes blazed into life, 'or— if you will quell that fire I seem to have ignited—to allow you to dress for dinner for the duration of her stay. Do you possess a suitable outfit?'

'I'd rather dine alone.'

'Stop acting the piqued schoolgirl,' he sighed. 'It gets a little monotonous.'

Cara shook his hand from her wrist. 'Yes, I've got a dress, but I won't--' There she was, being childish again!

'Won't what, Miss Hirst?'

She sighed. Nothing she did was right in this man's eyes. 'Provided your aunt gives her permission, I'll wear a dress.'

'Right. Stay there, while I tackle her. It's best if I speak to her alone.' Cara fretted, but he was not long. He was smiling when he came out. 'The answer, after a short but sweet verbal tussle, is "yes". So do your best, Miss Hirst, so as not to offend my guest's sensibilities, won't you?'

Again she found herself wondering how serious he was. Surely he was not being sarcastic a second time at the expense of his beautiful colleague and collaborator?

'I'll do my best, Mr. Sutherland,' she said demurely, then flicked him a quick, provocative glance. He narrowed his eyes and followed her progress as she raced all the way up the stairs.

Cara was determined not to let herself down. For the first time since she had met him, she would be able to show Shaun Sutherland just how feminine she could be. When she had moved from her lodgings in London, after giving up her teaching job, she had packed all her belongings into the two suitcases she had brought with her.

As she pulled her only evening dress from the wardrobe, her heart beat a little faster. She had wondered, when she had seen the dress in the department store, when she would ever wear it and had hesitated about buying it. It was flame-coloured and the material shone with a surface sheen, catching the light as she moved. The halter neck revealed smooth white shoulders and arms. The neckline was low, the dress shaping itself to the figure. From the neat waist the skirt fell in folds to the floor.

On her lips she put a flame-coloured lipstick to match the material. Eye-shadow added mystery to her blue eyes. Her hair crackled with life as the comb ran through it. Her sandals were gold-coloured to match the gilt earrings she fastened to her ears.

As she surveyed her own reflection, she could not subdue a feeling of triumph which gave a glow to her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes. Would she, she wondered with impish amusement, 'offend' Shaun's guest's 'sensibilities' now?

When she entered the dining-room, three pairs of eyes focussed on her. Mrs. Driver who, with the aid of her new chair, must have taken herself there, looked upon her with horror threaded through with a strange kind of fear. Ginni Ravenga gazed with unbelieving dismay.

Shaun, whose eyes snapped open, then closed down, kept his-thoughts strictly to himself. But if there was anything to be gleaned from his cold, impersonal expression, it was a puzzling disapproval, puzzling because it had been he, after all, who had sought permission for her to discard her uniform and dress formally for dinner.

A moment of uncertainty nagged at Cara's carefully assumed poise. Had she overdressed? The gown she was wearing was simplicity itself. It was in the cut that the designer had triumphed. Was she, perhaps, revealing too much bare flesh, had she applied a surfeit of make-up?

Shaun was the first to move. He came across to her. 'I see you've obeyed instructions.' His sardonic eyes skimmed her shoulders and arms, working their way slowly to the greatest point of revelation, where the neckline had decided to bring its plunge to an end. 'You have dressed—undressed—for dinner.'

Ginni strolled to join him, linking her arm through his. Her gown was black and, if anything, more revealing than Cara's. Why, Cara thought irritably, is he looking at me with such disapproval, when his girl-friend is showing far more of herself than I am?

'Have you more in your wardrobe like that, Miss Hirst?' Ginni asked purringly. 'If so, I must come and inspect it one day and maybe make off with a dress or two when you're not looking.'

'As a teacher, I couldn't indulge myself where clothes were concerned, Miss Ravenga. This gown was bought for a special occasion. I've worn it once before, that's all.'

'She should wear it more often, shouldn't she, Shaun?' Her kitten eyes looked up at him. 'It makes her—almost— human.'

Cara looked quickly at Shaun, but his response to the insult was well concealed, if, indeed, he reacted at all.

Cara walked across the room to stand beside Mrs. Driver. 'You must change back into your uniform, Miss Hirst, as soon as dinner is over.' She sounded shocked and her voice quavered a little.

Shaun, instead of soothing, exacerbated his aunt's anxieties. 'Worried, Aunt Flora, in case your *angel* of a companion-help should be found to be female after all, instead of an emotionless robot? Are you scared that some man might make off with her into the night, do what he wishes with her and return her to you demoralised beyond words, but awakened and filled with immoral desires which won't let her rest until they are satisfied again?'

'Shaun! You shock me unutterably with such language. And such ideas.'

'Never fear, Aunt. Since I'm the only man ever to see her like that, you'll have no trouble in that way from me.' His eyes hardened. 'I'm immune to Miss Hirst's charms.' He added, with apparent irrelevance, but Cara knew at once what he meant, 'I favour women who are genuine through and through, not those who give every appearance of being honest, but who are, in reality, living a lie.'

Ginni laughed, hanging on to Shaun even more tightly. 'You intrigue me, Shaun. Is Miss Hirst living a lie? Is she not the innocent, inexperienced, pure woman she looks— when she's not wearing that dress, of course.'

Cara stared at Shaun, daring him not to let her down in front of his aunt. He smiled at the fear she could not disguise, but his smile stopped short of his eyes.

'What are you talking about?' Mrs. Driver demanded. 'Absolute nonsense you're talking, both of you. Miss Hirst is as straight as a die and as innocent as a new-born lamb. I've never been so certain of anything in my life. If she weren't, she wouldn't be an employee of mine. I simply would not tolerate a deceitful, untrustworthy young woman seeing to my every personal need. Now, let's call the housekeeper and get on with the meal. The sooner it's over, the sooner my companion can change back into decent clothing.'

Over dinner, conversation proceeded as before, to the exclusion of Cara. Dressed attractively though she might be, she was still, in her companions' mind, the employee, unequal in status to the other occupants of the table. When the meal was over, Cara left the room swiftly. She made the excuse that she must change back into her uniform and make her employer comfortable before her favourite television programmes began.

She closed the dining-room door and for a moment her head drooped. The dress had been a failure, its effect had been nil. Shaun had dismissed it with caustic words and hurtful statements and she vowed she would never wear it again. As she crossed the hall, the dining-room door opened and closed again. She did not look back but ran up the stairs, sensing that it might be Shaun coming after her to reprimand her for dressing so inappropriately.

It was Shaun and he was coming after her. He caught her on the landing outside her bedroom. Before she could turn the door handle, his hands were upon her shoulders, turning her and looking her up and down.

After all he had said about her in the dining-room, after his statement that he was 'immune to Miss Hirst's charms', the way he was looking at her now—like a man whose desires had been aroused but whose emotions remained as remotely untouched as the peak of an iceberg, her outrage flared her and put a match to her temper.

'Where's the "overgrown schoolgirl" now, Mr. Sutherland,' she said, speaking low and intensely. 'You see, I heard what you said to your aunt, as no doubt you intended me to. And where's the plain, unattractive companion-help you referred to, the deceitful little cheat--'. His fingers bruised the soft flesh of her upper arms. 'Be quiet,' he ground out, 'be quiet, or I'll--' He did not wait to utter his threat. He pushed her into her room and slammed the door. His arms caught at her roughly and his mouth hit hers with a violence which sent her backwards, compelling her to cling to him with the desperation of a sailor clinging to a ship's superstructure in roaring seas.

She was lost in the storm-force of his lovemaking and he showed her no mercy until the fury of his ardour was spent. He had vanquished her by brute

strength and she lay weak in his arms. Then, with a gesture of distaste, he pushed her away.

'That was what you wanted, wasn't it? That's what you've been asking for the whole evening. Did you enjoy it?' he sneered. 'Did I come up to the standard of your fiancé? Or does he treat you as I treat the Meissen porcelain I have in glass cabinets in my house—as if a mere touch would snap you apart?'

Cara walked unsteadily from him to the window, but she did not stare out at the darkening evening. Her hands covered her face. She was shaking uncontrollably and there seemed to be nothing she could do about it.

'G-go away,' she whispered, 'j-just go away.'

A few moments later she turned and found he had gone.

Next morning Cara received a letter from Steven. It was a long, complaining letter, saying that he was not really satisfied with her explanation. How *could* she love him if, knowing he was coming all that way to see her, she could go off and spend the day with another man?

He would give her one more chance, he said. In two days' time, at the weekend, he would come north again and expect her to be waiting for him on the dunes where they had planned to meet before. She would simply have to beg her employer for time off. If she loved him enough she would find a way.

Sighing, Cara folded the letter. Life was becoming too complicated. Steven did not realise that if she asked for a few hours' leave, her employer would want to know why. And if she explained the reason for her unusual request, then her job with Mrs. Driver would be over and that would mean the end of their hopes for a long time for a home of their own.

She stared out of the window, searching for the islands which were almost lost in the mist. Did she want to share a home with Steve? Did she want to

share the rest of her life with him? Did she love him enough to do just that?
Did she love him at all?

For most of the day, Shaun and his guest shut themselves away in the library. Cara assumed they were collaborating on their play. That evening, Cara decided against wearing the dress which had so inflamed Shaun's passions and anger. Instead she chose a simple white, high-necked sleeveless top which, although it covered the bare skin which last night had so shocked her employer and so provoked her employer's nephew, still did not hide the extreme femininity of her figure.

The long amber-coloured skirt matched the golden-brown stone of the Victorian-style locket which she wore round her neck. Inside the locket was a picture of Steven and one of herself and Steven with his arm round her. Both photographs had been miniaturised. No one at the dinner table, she reflected, would know those pictures were there. And no one, certainly not Shaun, would be interested enough to ask if the locket contained any pictures of her 'loved one', as they were traditionally expected to do, since she was not allowed by Mrs. Driver to possess a 'loved one'.

Mrs. Driver's face registered greater satisfaction with her appearance. Ginni, after a cursory look, lost interest. Only Shaun's eyes lingered, missing nothing, the eyeshadow, the gilt bracelet Steven had once given her, the pendant locket, the shapeliness beneath. His expression was cold, unreadable and, after the long, initial examination, indifferent.

The conversation proceeded much as before, with Cara entirely excluded. Part of her was pleased, the other part filled with indignation. They were deliberately treating her as an untutored ignoramus. Yet her qualifications in her chosen subject of history were good enough to take her to the top of the teaching tree had she been able to keep order and convey the considerable knowledge she had acquired to the minds of the children she had tried to teach.

. After coffee, Cara pushed back her chair. 'Please excuse me, Mrs. Driver. With Mr. Sutherland's permission, I must go to the library to find a new book to read to you.' She looked at Shaun, who nodded curtly.

In the library, she wandered along the shelves, but the book titles were blurred and distorted. Whatever happened, she told herself severely, she must not give way to those clamouring tears. She blinked them away and found the book Mrs. Driver had asked for. At the moment, Thomas Hardy was her favourite author, and Shaun's library contained a number of his novels.

Holding the book, Cara wandered to the window which overlooked the dunes—those dunes where in two days' time she had to find a way of meeting Steven. How could she possibly ask permission to do such a thing? If only Steven realised how stupid it would be—like asking for her own dismissal.

The door opened and Cara turned guiltily, to look into Shaun's taut face.

'You're taking a long time making up your mind. Perhaps you need some help?'

Cara hurried to the door, only to find him barring her way, arms folded, a hard smile on his face. Since she was physically unable to remove him from her path, she had no alternative but to wait impatiently until he chose to let her go.

His nearness created a response inside her which appalled her by its strength. She looked into his eyes with unconscious appeal. If only he would soften, if only he would wrap his arms about her and ...

She was mesmerised by his eyes. Her fingers round the book tightened. 'Shaun?' she whispered. But she would have got more response from one of the portraits on the wall. Her lip quivered. 'Please let me pass.'

'Why should I?'

She tried to think of an answer, but could only shake her head. His hand moved and fingers lifted her chin, bringing her face up so that he could gaze at it, searching her eyes for—what elusive piece of information?

His hand moved from her chin and lifted the locket, brushing against her breast as he did so. She flushed, quelling the desire his touch had stirred. With an action that was so quick she had no time to anticipate and prevent it, he had snapped the locket open and was staring at the photographs it held. Now he knew her secret in its entirety.

He clicked the locket shut and threw it back against her. Disgust narrowed his eyes, grated in his voice as he said, 'Get out. Get out of my library.'

Quietly and with a carefully mustered dignity, she did as she was told.

Ginni Ravenga left next morning. Her exit from Wildsea Castle was noisy and angry. It was, Cara thought, watching her through her employer's living-room window, as if she were leaving the stage in the middle of a play. Not only the stage, but the theatre itself.

Shaun saw her off and as the taxi taking her to the station moved down the drive, he gave a brief wave. Ginni did not appear to return his wave. He seemed to lift a shoulder in a careless shrug and returned to the house.

Cara was puzzled, running a hand over her soft fair hair. Had something gone wrong between them? More likely, she assured herself, that Miss Ravenga had a pressing acting engagement in London and had been forced temporarily to abandon her work on the play she and Shaun were writing.

'Miss Hirst.' Cara turned, unaware that Mrs. Driver had been watching her. 'Your hair is growing too long. You're looking too—fetching. The men will be after you, and that simply doesn't come into my scheme of things. Go down to the village and get it cut, please.'

Cara was aghast. 'What, now, Mrs. Driver? But— but--'

'No "buts". If you want to keep your job with me you must obey the rules. Give me my purse. Since it's I who have told you to get it done, I shall pay.'

Don't get it cut again, whatever my aunt says. Let it grow. Shaun's words that day he had made love to her on the island.

'Please, Mrs. Driver,' she pleaded, 'I'll tie it back with ribbon, fasten it down with hair-grips. I'd rather do any-thing than have it cut.'

Mrs. Driver ignored her pleas. 'Here's the money. Take the car and off you go. It won't take them long. They won't be busy at this time of the morning.'

It was an order Cara had to obey. The day was dull and a breeze was rousing the trees and plants. Over the sea and in the distance, great clouds were massing. As Cara went to the garage, she worried at the car keys in her hand. How much longer could she allow herself to submit to the indignities this job imposed?

The eccentric regulations concerning her personal appearance, her employer's abrupt commands and accusations —they were growing intolerable. When she reached the garage, Shaun was getting into his car.

'Where are you going?'

The tone he adopted made Cara bristle. She supposed he was put out by the sudden departure of his girl-friend, and had to have someone on whom to expend his irritation.

'To the village.' A spurt of spite made her tell him with a sharp, tight smile, 'To get my hair cut.'

He got out of the car and slammed the door. A few steps brought him beside her and he took the car keys from her.

'You're not getting your hair cut. You're coming with me. I've had my fill of this nonsense. The time has come for this whole situation to be finally and conclusively resolved.'

He seized her wrist, but she strained from him. 'What do you mean? What are you going to do?' Her voice rose to a shriek. 'Let me go! Let me do what your aunt has told me to do.' He ignored her, pulling her up the stone steps

between the columns and towards the entrance doors. 'I don't want to lose my job, Mr. Sutherland,' she pleaded. 'I must do as my employer tells me. I don't mind getting my hair cut, I don't *mind*, I tell you!'

I don't want to lose sight of you, she was thinking. If I disobey, I'll be dismissed and I'll never see you again ... She finally brought him to a halt in the great, echoing hall. 'I'll do anything, Mr. Sutherland,' she whispered, 'anything you want, only let me get my hair cut so that I can stay.'

'You want my aunt's fortune so badly,' he rasped, 'you would even sell yourself to me—to keep me quiet?'

If he had hit her he couldn't have hurt her more.

'That's not what I meant,' she murmured hoarsely.

'No? Then tell me what you did mean.'

What had she meant? That she loved him so much she would put up with his taunts and his aunt's outrageous demands for the rest of her life in order to be near him? But how could she put that into words?

'What about the man in your locket, the man in your life?'

'What—what about him?'

'My word, you're an even bigger two-faced little cheat than I ever realised.'

He grasped her arm again, losing all patience. When she saw that he was pulling her towards his aunt's room, she struggled as if he were impelling her towards the edge of an abyss. He turned the handle and pushed Cara in front of him into the room.

'Aunt, I want your attention.'

Mrs. Driver removed her spectacles and looked up at him. Then her glance lowered to his punishing hold on Cara's arm. Mrs. Driver raised her eyes and

it was as if she had sensed a change approaching, like a storm that was rumbling over someone else's sky.

The wind, which had started the day as a breeze, was stronger now, hissing and whimpering through cracks and under doors.

'This girl,' he held up Cara's arm, 'whom you dote upon, and who to you can do no wrong, is the most shameless, brazen little liar it has ever been my misfortune to meet.'

'Mr. Sutherland,' Cara pleaded, 'please, *please* ..

His grip tightened. 'She has not only told *me* lie after lie, she has acted one continuously to *you* ever since she came into your employ.'

Mrs. Driver's book fell unheeded from her lap.

'It will probably come as a great shock to you,' her nephew went on, 'after all her vows to the contrary, that not only has she a boy-friend, but he is also her fiancée. She came here to work for you purely and simply to earn as much money as possible in as short a time as possible for the home which she and her husband-to-be intend to share after their marriage.'

'But, Shaun,' Mrs. Driver whispered, so pale now that Cara grew afraid, 'I don't understand. She said--'

'She's said a lot of things, Aunt. Nine out of ten of them have been lies. It's no longer possible to believe anything she says. She's here for the money and until now she has had very intention of staying on as long as her luck held out, so as to benefit from the fortune you promised her when you're not longer with us.'

'You're wrong, Mr. Sutherland!' Cara cried. 'You're '-

'It's no good. You can't believe a word she says, Aunt.'

Mrs. Driver's shaking hand bent to retrieve the book. Cara, out of habit, dived to get to it first. It was taken quickly from her by that frail, trembling

hand as if the owner could no longer bear to have any of her possessions touched by the girl who, until that moment, had been set high above all her other employees.

The seed of doubt had been sown and nothing, certainly no denial of guilt and complicity, would ensure that it did not flower. And it was all the doing of the man who, in her blind folly, she had come to love so deeply.

Mrs. Driver's dazed eyes lifted. 'Deny it, Miss Hirst.' Her voice wavered. 'Tell me that what my nephew is saying is not true. You have no fiance, no plans to marry.'

How could she deny it, except to say, All that is in the past. Now I love your nephew so much the thought of marriage to another man fills me with repulsion? So she did not answer. Into the painful silence came Shaun's abrasive voice.

'Tell my aunt the truth. At least do that before you go. Be honest enough for once to admit that all I've said is correct:'

'Go?' She looked at him, as dazed now as Mrs. Driver. What did he mean?

'Deny it, Miss Hirst.' Mrs. Driver's voice was a whisper, her eyes full of appeal. 'Tell me my nephew has made it up.'

Cara crouched at Mrs. Driver's side, putting her hand over the gnarled, veined hand which rested on the book. There was a lump in her throat which would not go. 'Part of it is true, Mrs. Driver.'

'Which part? Tell me it's the part about marriage that's incorrect. The part about staying with me for my fortune doesn't matter. But the other...'

'It's true that I have a—a boy-friend.'

'Call him fiance, Miss Hirst,' Shaun grated. 'Don't prevaricate any more. That's what he is.'

'A—a fiance. We were planning to save enough money to buy a home.' Mrs. Driver withdrew her hand from under Cara's. 'It's true I was attracted by the salary.' Her eyes lifted and now it was hers that held appeal. 'But if you want me to stay, Mrs. Driver, I'll break my engagement. I'll tell my fiance I won't leave you.'

'A great sacrifice,' Shaun broke in bitinglly. 'You wait for the fortune to fall into your lap and carry on a secret love affair until the day your fiance can slip the ring on your finger—the day my aunt dies.'

Cara straightened and faced him. 'Can't you be quiet? You've done enough damage. Can't you leave me alone now?' To Mrs. Driver, she said, 'I'm sorry to have upset you so, but I meant what I said. If you want me to stay ...'

'You'll have to go.'

There was no quaver in her voice now, only resolution, a straightened back and firmly held shoulders. Resolution—and condemnation. Her employee had been accused, tried and found wanting.

Cara paled but held her head high. 'I'll pack my bags— unless you want me to stay until you've found a replacement?'

'No. Like my nephew, I like honesty and straightforwardness. It seems you lack both qualities, Miss Hirst. I have never been so let down by my own judgement in my life before.' She waved her hand dismissively. 'Mrs. Stapleton will come to my aid whenever I need help. Please go as soon as you can.' Her eyes stared straight ahead. 'If you wish to stay for one more night, you may do so. But I shall not require your services again. My nephew will pay you what I owe you and I shall pay him.' She looked up at Shaun. 'Whatever it is, double it. She has served me well, if falsely.' She looked once more at Cara, and there was a suspicion of tears behind those resolute eyes. 'There's no need for you to say goodbye. I don't want to see you again.'

CHAPTER TEN

Cara did stay one more night, but she dined alone in her room. Afterwards, as the evening darkened, she gazed out at the wind-whipped waves, their crests creaming and running downhill only to rise again. Like the prospect of any future happiness, the islands were receding into twilight. Soon the lighthouse would be sending out its signals. *Keep away, keep away ...* Like Mrs. Driver. *'Go away, go soon. I don't want to see you again.'*

Cara had not been able to cry. What would have been the use? She should, she told herself, have had more sense than to fall in love with a man like Shaun. She was as outside his social and intellectual circle as a mouse gazing into a lion's den. Any moment that lion could put its paw through the wire mesh and end the mouse's life. Shaun Sutherland, by the means of a few well-chosen words, had done just that. Once away from this place, from *him*, she would no longer be living, simply existing.

There was a knock on the door. It was, she thought, Mrs. Stapleton offering help with packing. It was Shaun Sutherland.

'What do you want?' she asked ill-temperedly.

He forced the door against her pressure, closed it and leaned against it. He looked at her in a detached, clinical way. There was about him no sign of repentance for what he had done to her, no indication of sorrow at her impending departure.

'A chat.'

'I'm sorry. I'm not in a "chatty" mood.'

The word was ill-chosen. I want to talk to you.'

To *me*? To the viper you have, on a number of occasions, taken to your bosom, the poison in your house, the polluter of your atmosphere? The liar, the cheat, the deceitful one?' She was near to breakdown and she made an effort to control herself. Her lips trembled and she turned away again.

It was darker now and the flashes had begun. Flash ... a few moments, then ... Flash ... *Keep away ... Keep away ..*!

'When you've rid the venom from your soul, when you've cleansed yourself of emotive words, let me know, and I'll make a proposition.'

Slowly she turned, uncertain of his meaning.

'Are you listening?' She nodded. 'Right. It's a business proposition.' He strolled to join her at the window. *Flash, flash ...*

'At some time in the near future, I'm intending to write a novel with the Tudor era as a background. I shall need someone to do the research for me. History is your subject. I wondered if you would care to become my researcher.' A short pause. 'I would pay you, of course.' Still she was silent. 'That way you could become a woman again, dress how you liked, keep your fiance, earn money—I'd pay what my aunt was paying you—and there would be no need for any more deceit and lies. You could save for the house you want so much.'

For a long time she could not answer. She was too choked with emotion, with hope, with vain longing. Visions, highlighted by the flashes, passed in front of her eyes—of herself poring over Shaun's books, delighting in the wealth of knowledge they would offer her. The joy of using her brain again, of being regarded as Shaun Sutherland's intellectual equal! It brought those tears perilously near to spilling.

'No, thank you,' she said, thickly.

He made a strange, jerky movement—almost, she thought, as if he had done his duty in trying to make amends and was relieved by her refusal. His faint shrug underlined the indifference she suspected. 'If that's how you feel--' He paused. 'It would have been a good partnership.'

'As good as the one you have with Ginni Ravenga?' The bitter words were out before she was aware of their presence in her mind.

He said slowly, 'You'll never forgive me for telling my aunt the truth about you, will you?'

'Never,' she said, 'never, never ...'

It was dark now, except for the lighthouse.

'There's a school in the town, a bus ride away. They need a teacher of history. I've just phoned the headmaster. I know him personally. There would have to be an interview, of course, and he'd need references, but it's almost certain that the job's yours because of your qualifications. In these parts, such things as graduate teachers are snapped up before they can take the first train back to London.'

She turned to him, seeing his face only when the flashes allowed. 'Why are you being so considerate about what happens to me? Is it your guilty conscience?'

'I could,' he said, and he seemed to be speaking between his teeth, 'be very, very nasty to you for that. But you've been slapped down enough for one day, and I never hit a man—or a woman—when they're down.'

'I'm sorry.' Her voice was dull. 'It was thoughtful of you, but I'd never get the job.'

'Good God, girl, it's practically yours already.' She shook her head, seeking to avoid telling him the truth about herself even now. But the question she had been dreading came at last. 'Tell me something. Why did you get out of teaching?'

This time he was getting the truth. 'Disciplinary troubles. I couldn't keep a single class in order. They walked all over me. I wasn't exactly fired, but it was suggested very politely that I should resign. So now you know.'

He whistled between his teeth. 'So now I know.'

'I was a failure.' A long silence and her throat grew tight. 'I've been a failure again. If I worked for you, for the third time in my life I'm sure I'd fail.'

Besides,' she was speaking unguardedly, 'there are other reasons ...' She stopped.

He took her up at once. 'What other reasons?'

You, she was thinking. Being so near to you, seeing you so much, talking and discussing with you. Loving you, wanting you ... But only useful to you as an extension of your brain.

'Forget it.' Her voice was still bitter. 'I shall go tomorrow afternoon. Steven wrote and told me he was coming north and would I try to see him. There's no reason why I shouldn't now. He'd give me one more chance, he said. Otherwise ...' Her voice trailed off but the bitterness lingered. When she had her voice under control again, she went on, 'I'll go back with, him on the train. He can carry my cases.'

'I see.' There was silence in the room, but outside the sea was loud, the waves punishing the shore as they crashed against it, swarming high against the rocks on which the house stood. 'Then this is goodbye. Tomorrow I go to London by car. I shall leave first thing. Before I go,' he looked at her profile against the window pane, 'I'll give you this. The money my aunt owes you.'

Cara took the cheque and scanned the writing. She calculated swiftly and exclaimed, 'But you've more than doubled it.'

'I've trebled it.'

'But why? It's far too much.' She tried to hand it back, but he waved it away.

'This, as they say, is where we came in.' He eased his back against the alcove into which the window was set, and folded his arms. 'You said that, almost word for word, at the interview when we first met and I gave you money to cover your expenses. I must admit I was impressed then by what I thought was your incredible honesty.' His voice hardened. 'Now I know you better, I see through your cunning little stratagems.'

She pocketed the cheque, finding within herself no answer to his censure. 'Thank you,' she said in a flat voice.

Her apparently calm acceptance of the large amount of money he had just handed over seemed to incense him. 'I should have known,' he rasped, 'that you'd squeeze every penny you could get out of me. Your record from the start of our acquaintance should have warned me, so how could I have expected otherwise?'

He turned to go. Was this the end? Nothing more?

'Shaun?' she whispered, her eyes filling but unseen in the darkness.

He went out without a word in response. Shaun did not wait till morning. At the start of an almost sleepless night Cara heard his car roar away down the winding road that led from Wildsea Castle. He had gone out of her life as if he had never been.

She rose early, breakfasting in the kitchen. Mrs. Stapleton knew nothing of the background to Cara's departure, and said a tearful goodbye. Holding her suitcases, Cara walked down the long curving road, stopping only once to look back. The housekeeper was still at the top of the steps and Cara put down a case to return the final wave.

It was some hours before Steven was due. With her cases, heavy as they were, there was little she could do but wait on the dunes. Then an idea came to her. If she left her cases at the hotel, she could wander down to the harbour for the last time.

Valerie Pendle was in her usual place. 'Can I help you?' she asked brightly. She had failed to recognise Cara in her well-fitting, fashionable pants, pink roll-necked top and chunky-knit jacket. Valerie's eyes opened wide. 'It's not Miss Hirst? Good grief, outside your terrible uniform you look—well, if you don't mind my saying so, stunning!'

Cara coloured at the girl's spontaneous praise. Valerie eyed Cara's suitcases. 'Going on holiday?'

Cara shook her head. 'I'm leaving.'

'But why? I thought the old lady doted on you.'

Cara replied vaguely, 'Lots of reasons.'

Valerie said slowly, 'I once thought there might be something between you and Shaun. You know—the way you and he were always quarrelling!'

She laughed and Cara laughed with her. 'Can you,' Cara responded with false amusement, 'imagine Shaun Sutherland falling for any of his aunt's companions? Especially a dowdy like me.'

Valerie looked at her quickly and then down at the papers on the counter. 'Not so dowdy now.'

'I've—I've got a boy-friend of my own, anyway.'

'You have? And Mrs. Driver found out? Bad luck. It wasn't allowed, was it? It sounds like a repeat of the last companion she had.' Valerie tutted sympathetically and asked if there was anything she could do to help.

'Yes, please. I'm meeting my boy-friend and going back with him. If you wouldn't mind looking after my cases until I come back for them? It's a couple of hours yet until he comes and I'd like to wander round a bit.'

'Saying goodbye?'

Cara caught her breath. 'Saying goodbye,' she echoed, thinking, I can't walk away from the place as if it meant nothing to me, just as Shaun Sutherland walked out of my life without a single backward glance.

She dragged her feet up and down the dunes, leaving behind her footprints. When the tide came in, the sea would take them. She reached the harbour and trod the cobbled stones to the end of the harbour arm. There, made fast with a rope, was Shaun's motor boat. It held so many memories, it pained her to look at it.

She gazed over the sea and found the islands standing out so clearly it seemed she had only to stretch her hand to touch them. *To touch them ...* Once more before she went away for ever, to touch the soil, the rocks of those islands ...

There was time, she told herself feverishly. The horizon was sharp, perhaps even too sharp which might mean rain before long. There were clouds in the far distance, but they looked harmless enough. Even if they were storm clouds, she assured herself, they were many miles away.

Cara got the engine going with surprising ease, congratulating herself on having watched Shaun so closely in his management of the controls the day he had taken her out. As the boat moved slowly into the open sea, she thought, 'It's no more difficult than driving a car.'

She sat on the wooden seat and with her foot on the accelerator, increased the speed until the wind was pulling at her hair and the spray spattering her all over. She felt exhilaration beyond belief.

It was more than piloting the boat, it was a sense of escape, of sudden and unexpected freedom, of leaving her worries and uncertainties behind. Her future, even ...

That was it—*her future*! She was running away from it, from Steven who demanded to be part of it, to whom she would find herself tied for the rest of her life. When all the time she loved another man. *Running away*. That was what Shaun said she was always doing. *Shaun, Shaun!* On the island she would be near to him. There she could dream he was beside her again. The sea air, she thought, watching the islands grow nearer, must have gone to my head. I'm drunk with freedom after so many restrictions, rolling about with it on top of the waves.

It was then that she noticed how much more forceful the waves were becoming, lifting the boat and dropping it in the troughs. Perhaps there was a storm coming after all. Those clouds certainly looked nearer, but, she reasoned, calming her fears, maybe it was because she was nearer to them.

The water was more turbulent than when Shaun had moored the boat, and this time only a small area of pebbly sand remained uncovered, but she manoeuvred the boat towards the wooden post and secured the rope to it, as Shaun had done. There were natural steps in the rock and she climbed them, finding herself once again amidst the multitude of sea birds. Their cries rang out as they complained of her presence.

They seemed more restless this time, she noticed, then she saw that the morning sky, which had seemed so golden on the shore, had clouded over. Those distant clouds had advanced and darkened. A shaft of anxiety shot through her, but she did not intend to stay long. After a quick look round she would return to the mainland, meet Steven and return to London with him. *And live unhappily ever after?*

There was a remedy, wasn't there? There was a weapon she could use, the one Shaun had used the last time Steven had come north. She could stay where she was until Steven had gone. He wouldn't give her long this time, not after the way she had broken her promise to him before. He would wait, tell himself that she had let him down once again, tell himself, too, that it was the end, then go back to London alone.

Was that what she wanted? That sense of freedom she had felt on the way over to the islands—wasn't that a clue? Hadn't it been her unconscious mind telling her what a good idea it would be to run away—from Steve, from the entanglement of her life with his?

And stay with Shaun, a whisper said. If not with him, then with his memory. She turned her back on the mainland, and it was an action which was decisive and final.

There, on the islands, she would remain, watching the minutes pass until she could return in safety to the harbour, with no fear of finding Steven waiting for her.

Then she would collect her cases and go to London, find herself a room and a job—anything would do—and try to forget.

The clouds advanced, the sky darkened. The waves frothed over the rocks, but still she stayed on, shutting her eyes to the coming storm. Even if it broke before she left, she told herself with confidence, it would not last. Stolidly she waited, sitting on a flat rock and hugging her knees.

Now Steven would be arriving. She stared about her unconcerned. Now he would be fretting at her lateness. She felt a strange power surge through her, a power, just discovered, not over others but over herself. Now he would be

telling himself she was faithless, worthless. I've had enough, he'd be thinking, no more chances ...

Now he would be gone!

Her heart sang, she was filled with an intense delight. She was as free as those birds around her. The first splutter of rain brought her to her senses. She had been so absorbed in her thoughts, she had not noticed a worsening in the weather. The rain became a downpour and she turned up her collar and hurried down the steps. There was no more beach now and she stared horrified. The boat was tossing helplessly on the thunderous seas which bore down upon it, engulfing it, only to let it rise again.

She watched, unbelieving, as the waves took the small vessel up and crashed it against the rocky pinnacles, smashing it to pieces. It came to her suddenly that she was trapped by the storm, the most ferocious she had ever experienced. She looked down at herself. With dismay she realised that her clothing was totally inadequate to withstand the ravages such a storm would inflict. It took a few moments, no more, for her to become wet to the skin.

The wind tore at her hair, pushing and pulling at her huddled form until she feared she might be blown into those hungry, roaring seas. Facing the truth at last, she admitted to herself that such an inferno could, in these parts, go on not just for an hour, but for days.

If she were marooned with no food and no shelter ...Shelter? She remembered Shaun's hut and turned, fighting against the terrifying strength of the gale, to climb the rocks to the plateau. Her fumbling, shaking fingers, reaching for the door of the hut, found that the padlock had been secured. Even her shoulder hitting the door repeatedly had no effect. The hut was locked and barred against her. With her head down against the wind, she struggled round to look in the window.

Inside was all she could want—warmth, comfort, cooking facilities, even, probably, tinned food in the cupboard. Miserably she turned away, giving up hope. No one could come to her in that storm, no one would know where she was, anyway. She sank down to the ground, away from the worst of the wind.

But the rain was incessant, making her clothes cling and her head run with water. She was shivering uncontrollably now. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the wall of the hut.

Better stop fighting, she told herself, and drifted into a feverish dream. No Shaun now, no Steve, no Mrs. Driver. Only she and the sea birds were left in the whole wide world. Only Cara Hirst and her useless, shivering body ...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was dark when she stirred. Her head throbbed, her limbs ached and into her pain-racked mind came the realisation that it was still raining. The storm seemed hardly to have abated.

Her body was quiet now. The shivering had stopped. She simply had not sufficient energy to keep it going. Her clothes were soaked and icy cold, clinging heavily to her lifeless body. Since consciousness was so unpleasant, she slipped gladly back into the sleep which seemed only too pleased to welcome her.

It was troubled sleep, painted with vivid dreams—of Shaun kissing her on the sands; in the hotel bedroom when he had returned her shoes and jacket; that night on the library settee, when she had slept in his arms ...

A voice rang out as if in a great, echoing room, a pleading, shaking voice. 'If you become caught up with my nephew, you will be leaving yourself open to the heartbreak and unhappiness suffered by all the other women who have sought his attention and often gained it.' 'His attention, not his love, Miss Hirst.' 'He holds himself aloof ...' *Don't let him use you only to cast you aside like all the others ...*

Then there were hands uncurling her, gathering her up, arms lifting her. The dream was growing worse, because those arms were rough and unkind, the person carrying her kicking at something and taking her somewhere closed in, where the wind didn't howl and the rain didn't rain ...

Her body was lowered on to something hard and smooth. There was a creaking noise as if something was being unfolded. She was being lifted again and put down on softness and covered with something rough and warm to the touch.

The shaking started again and arms went round her, wrapping the rough thing about her, holding her in a grip of iron, as if willing the shivering form into stillness. But it was no good. Try though she might, she could not keep still.

Then she was being uncovered, her clothing, soaked and useless, removed layer by layer. No one, she thought, consciousness creeping back, could do this to her—unless she was in hospital? Her eyes flickered open. No hospital. A wooden hut, Shaun's hut on the island. Oilskins, gleaming wet, had been thrown to the floor. An oil lamp burned, revealing a hard-featured profile and coldly angry eyes.

Shaun? She was still dreaming! He couldn't be there. He was in London.

'Keep still!'

Shaun's voice, Shaun's anger, Shaun's hands undressing her ... That was something she would not allow him to do. She struggled to sit up, thrashing her arms about to throw off his hands.

'Don't,' she cried, 'don't!'

He slipped off her sweater and peeled off her pants, leaving only what lay underneath. At least he had spared her the indignity of removing *everything!* Swift, hard strokes of the towel dried her body. Why, oh, why, she thought unhappily, must he be so rough?

That's better,' he said harshly. 'It's about time you co-operated.'

'Shaun,' she said weakly, 'oh, Shaun ...' She turned her head away.

Now she was covered again, the blankets pulled high. A pillow was beneath her head and a strange warmth was stealing over her. Moments later an arm was under her head and warm, fragrant-smelling soup was being spooned into her mouth. All the time he had been seeing to her, he must have been heating the liquid.

When she had had enough, he stopped and put the soup aside. He stood, hands on hips, looking down at her. In the dim light from the oil lamp, she searched his face, seeking the hidden treasure of a smile. She sought in vain.

In a flat voice she said, 'I thought you were in London.'

'I was, until a frantic telephone call from Mrs. Stapleton brought me rushing back. Valerie had apparently got worried because your cases hadn't been collected. It seems your fiance had called in. He was in a blazing temper and decided that as you weren't anywhere to be found, you had let him down again. He stormed back to London, telling Valerie to tell you that he never wanted to see you again.'

Cara, who was delighted to hear the news, remained silent.

Shaun waited for some response, some expression of sorrow, but, receiving none, went on, 'Valerie phoned Mrs. Stapleton, who called me. She said you were missing, that you seemed to have disappeared without trace and in that storm they feared for your safety. I came back by the next available train—it was faster than using my car—and on a hunch, went straight to the harbour. As I suspected, my boat was missing and I made an inspired guess as to where you'd gone. Only you would have been crazy enough to do such a thing, no doubt on a whim, which would have been in character.'

Did he really think so badly of her? she wondered sadly.

'I borrowed a friend's boat,' he said, 'and came across. Which is how I found you.'

There was a tremor in her voice as she said, 'You might have been swept overboard.'

'I might, but fortune smiled on me and I wasn't.' He considered her and said harshly, 'Tell me, what was the object of this crazy act? To draw attention to yourself by a self-inflicted wound, putting your life in jeopardy so as to stir some kind of guilt and self-reproach in those who, in your eyes, had wronged you?'

His sarcasm ravaged her more than the storm had done and she hated him for it.

'Is that why you came over here*?' he persisted, 'when anyone with even a grain of sense could have foreseen there was a storm approaching?'

She did not reply directly. Instead she said, her voice faltering, 'I'd arranged to meet Steven. As I told you, I had intended going back with him. But,' she added triumphantly, if a little light-headedly, 'I'm still here. He's gone. I let him go. If I didn't come, he said, it would be the end. So it's the end.' A small smile curled her mouth.

'Do you know what you're saying?'

She nodded slowly, her brain still lightweight, like Shaun's boat being tossed about on those terrifying waves. 'Gone,' she said, and her voice sounded slurred and strange. 'Never see him again.'

'You're feverish.'

His hand rested on her forehead, but she jerked petulantly. 'No, I'm not.'

'You've had no food for hours.'

She allowed him to spoon a little more soup into her mouth, then she turned her face to one side. 'Go away,' she spoke to the wall. 'Go away and leave me alone. You hate me. You told your aunt about me because you wanted to get rid of me out of your life ...' Her voice trailed away, leaving a heavy silence.

The smell of the oil lamp filled her nostrils, its hiss her ears. In the distance the sea was thundering against the rocks. How he had got there in that turmoil, she would never know. He had risked his life to reach her!

The thought made her turn her head. 'Your boat—it's smashed. I'm sorry, Shaun.' Her voice was so weak he had to bend to catch her words. His dark head was so near she had to hold her arms rigid at her sides to stop herself from reaching out and touching his hair. 'I'll pay,' she said. 'However much a new one costs, I'll pay.'

A smile touched his mouth but was soon gone. It was almost as if it had been too much of an effort to smile at her. 'I'll send you the bill.'

His eyes looked strained, his body under tension. It was the journey to the islands, she told herself, the terrible journey he'd just had.

'I mean it.' She turned away, turned back. 'You don't believe me, do you? You don't think I'm trustworthy, that everything I say is a lie. That's why you told your aunt...' Tears came at last, slipping down her cheeks to the pillow.

Even they did not seem to move him. His voice had not softened when he spoke again. 'Tell me something. You — found the hut. I know it was locked, but why didn't you smash the window, find a rock to stand on and then climb in?'

She shook her head. 'Even if I'd thought of it I wouldn't have done it.'

'Why not?'

'The hut belonged to you.'

'Well?'

So he wanted more? Should she go on? If she spoke her thoughts, would he delve beneath them, ferret out the truth and hold it up like a hunter, proud of his latest kill?

That voice in her mind rang out again, full of appeal and echoing round her brain. *I beg of you, don't allow yourself to become ensnared by my nephew's charms. He knows the ways of the world, and of women. He looks at life—at love —objectively, never becoming involved. Don't let him use you, only to cast you aside like all the others ...*

Cara raked his face, tracing the strong features, the mouth that could be cruel or tender as he pleased, the brown eyes that could castigate or caress, the broad, confident strength of him, and knew that for once, perhaps for the last time, she must tell him the truth. If he turned away, she knew what it would mean. It would be defeat and she would have to accept it.

Her eyes came back to his and as she spoke she tensed herself. 'If I had hurt the hut, it would have been like hurting you.'

She held her breath, waiting for his rejection.

Like the quiet, tranquil sunrise after a night of storm, a smile crept into his face, growing until it flooded his eyes. Their expression changed, but she could not read the meaning. Was he gloating, thinking, Here's another one?

'You would object to hurting me?'

She nodded, waited for his response, then, despairing because none came, turned away on to her side. Like an animal, she wanted to crawl into a corner and die.

There was a movement and he was crouching beside her, turning her so that their faces were close. She could feel his breath on her cheeks, the warmth that shone from his curiously bright eyes, then she was gathered into his arms and was lost in the tenderness of his kiss. It was sweet and it was gentle. He held her as if she might break.

Gentle and sweet—and meaningless! He was pitying her for having fallen in love with him, like so many other women. There's no future in it, he was trying to tell her, but I'll comfort you like a friend.

She pulled away. 'Don't kiss me! Don't even touch me! I mean nothing to you. You betrayed my secret to your aunt, you were the cause of her dismissing me. If it weren't for you, I'd still have a job, a home--'

He rose and said sarcastically, 'A fiance?'

She tried to sit up but flopped down with weariness. 'He's gone, I tell you. That's why I came over here.'

His eyes opened a fraction, then narrowed. 'Was that the real reason? You were running away again?' He eyed her a little scathingly. 'You spend your life doing that. Now you're running away from me.'

'Of course I am.' She spoke thickly. 'Any woman in her right mind would run as far as possible from you. You've got Ginni Ravenga, Valerie Pendle and heaven knows how many more.'

'Wrong,' he said curtly. 'I've got one woman in my life and one only. It's not Ginni and it's not Valerie.'

Cara's heart sank. So he had yet another woman somewhere, one who meant everything to him, one she had never heard of! 'Is that why Ginni went?' she whispered.

'Ginni went partly because she saw that my interest in her as a woman was non-existent and also because when we tried to work on the play I couldn't co-operate. Not wouldn't, couldn't. I had a mental blockage, nothing would come. There was both an external and an internal cause. For once—for the first time in my life—my emotions had got the better of me.'

So this woman really did mean more to him than all the others? From the bottom of her heart, Cara envied her.

'Shaun,' she said, tears catching at her voice, 'why did you tell your aunt about me?'

'I had my reasons. Partly selfish, but things didn't work out the way I'd planned.' He paused. 'Partly to free you for your fiance.'

'But,' she cried, 'I was running away from Steve. I didn't want to be freed for *him*!' She covered her mouth and stared at him. By her emphasis on Steven's name she had given herself away for the second time. What would he do, pity her again? Kiss her gently, compassionately, then tell her she was wasting her time?

But his eyes grew bright. 'That,' he said slowly, 'is the admission I've been waiting for. Now, Cara Hirst, let me show you who she is, that woman in my life, the only woman who will be there from now until I breathe my last.'

He sat sideways on the bed, slipped his arm beneath her stupefied yet pliant body and drew her to him. There was a roughness in his kiss which brought from her a response over which she had little control. Control was not needed any more. His kiss was that of a lover, not a pitying friend. It demanded and she gave—gave all that her weakened strength would allow.

There was no need for a barrier to his caressing hands, hands which drew from her kisses of an even greater sweetness, an eager yielding to his unbounded passion and, when at last he stopped, a clinging to him which told him more about her feelings for him than any spoken word could have conveyed.

'For how long,' he asked roughly, 'has this been going on in that mixed-up mind of yours?'

'You mean,' she asked shyly, 'how long have I loved you? From the moment I met you!' She smiled impishly and he pinched her chin. Then she added more seriously, 'Even before I met you, I read your books, and I admired and respected you.'

'Then how can I be sure,' he looked down at her teasingly, 'that it's love you feel for me and not hero- worship?'

She put her arms about his neck and drew him down again. 'I couldn't live without you,' she said simply. 'That was why today I didn't care if I died out there, because I thought I'd lost you for ever.'

His eyes searched hers with a deep seriousness, then he kissed her with a tender passion.

'Do you really love me?' she asked tremulously, still unable to take in all that was happening.

'Love you? I've loved you from the moment I set eyes on you! Why,' he went on, looking into her shining eyes, 'do you think I bought that chair for my aunt, if not to make life a little easier for you? Why did I buy you a car? Why did I put you in the best guest room if not for your personal comfort and happiness? And why did I tell you not to have your hair cut again?' He bent low over her, his mouth brushing hers. 'So that I could entwine my fingers in it like this, and bury my face in it, like this.'

After long moments he lowered her to the pillow. 'And why do you think I *really* told my aunt your secrets? To break her utter dependence on you and leave you free—to go to your boy-friend, if that was what you wanted or,' he

whispered, 'as I secretly hoped, to stay with me. I only opened up my house again to see you against its background. In my imagination I saw you as my wife, part owner of it with me.'

They gazed at each other in the hissing, fluctuating lamplight.

'As you know,' Shaun went on, 'I was aware from the start that you had a man in your life, but I hoped that, being parted from him, you might forget. When I realised that, far from forgetting him, you were using the job with my aunt as a means of buying your future with your boyfriend, I could hardly bring myself to forgive you.'

'I'm sorry, darling, for all the lies.' Her anxious eyes sought his. 'I got caught up in the web of deceit, I didn't know how to get out of it. All the time I loved you and loved you—and then I saw you with Valerie and Ginni..

'That was the only way,' he told her, smiling, 'I could have my revenge for your falsehoods and deception.'

'I wonder,' she said, 'you can ever forgive me. I've never ever lied to anyone before and,' she looked up at him, 'if you'll still have me, I promise never to do so again.'

'Still have you? Just try to stop me! The day can't come soon enough. When we're married, my love, will you be my researcher, as I asked you before I left for London?' She nodded eagerly. 'Will you be my *alter ego*, my other self?'

'I'll be to you whatever you want me to be,' she whispered.

'In a few days,' he murmured huskily, 'when you've recovered from your ordeal, I'll tell you exactly what that is!'

Later, he said that they would have to stay there for the night. 'I have a small stock of food which should see us through. By morning the storm should have abated sufficiently for us to make the journey back to the mainland.'

'Shaun,' Cara said shyly, 'where will you sleep?'

He kissed her lingeringly, then gave her a long searching look. 'Wherever you want me to; I shall respect your wishes, my sweet. There's a sleeping bag rolled up over there, so I could sleep on the floor beside you. Is that what you want?'

She nodded, and later, as she snuggled down into the bed, he covered her with the blankets. He kissed her with a passion which, as he checked himself forcibly, was muted into gentleness. Then, reluctantly parting from him, she drifted into sleep.

Later, in the dark hours, reliving her ordeal, she cried out his name. He was beside her in a flash. She dreamed she was lying in his arms, and when morning came, she found her dream was real.