



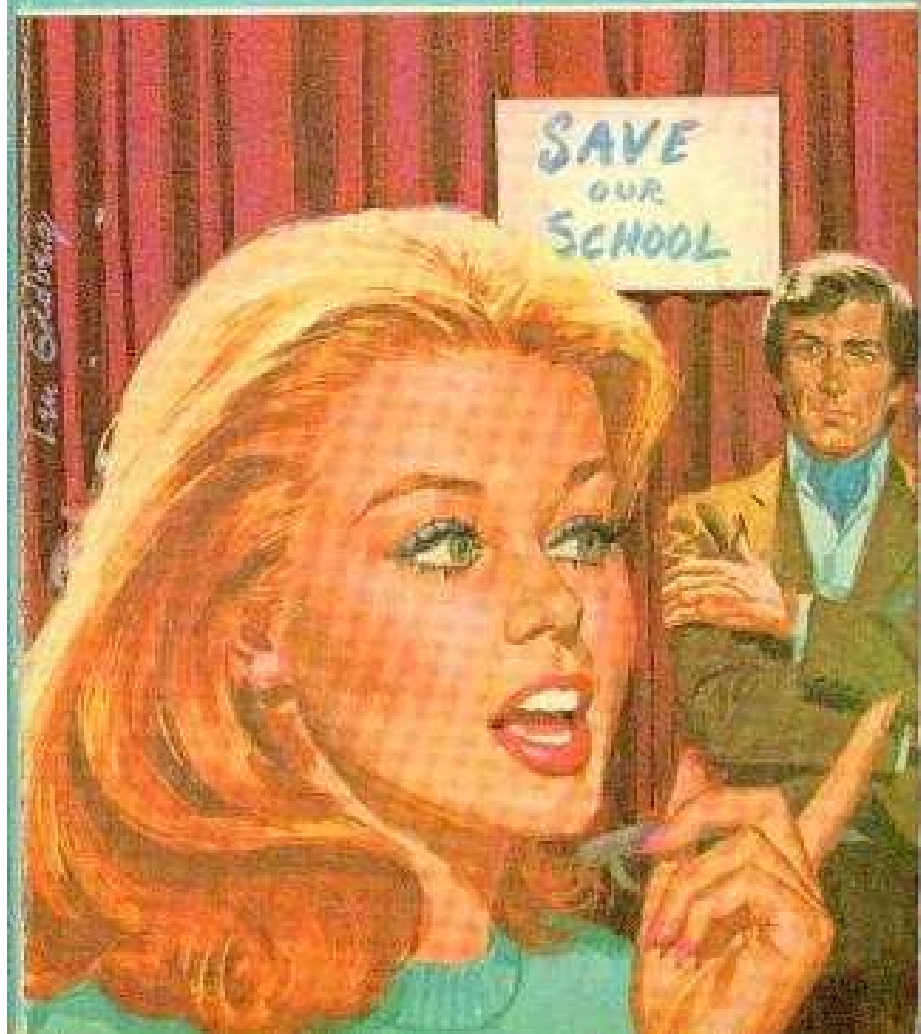
Harlequin Romance

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Rebel in Love

LILIAN PEAKE



REBEL IN LOVE

Lilian Peake

She was a challenge he couldn't ignore.

Lex Moran, chairman of the education committee, had the final decision on closing the village school.

Katrine Hume, teacher and newcomer to the village, instead of tactfully trying to influence his decision, had once again let her temper overcome discretion. She'd made an enemy of the one man who could help her cause.

"All right," she said, when the meeting was over. "so I was wrong. But I'm darned if fm going to fawn around anybody--however much power he holds!"

CHAPTER ONE

THE girl spoke clearly and with a sincerity and feeling which aroused the admiration of her audience. She already had their sympathy and support. They liked her rounded, honest-looking face, they admired her wide mouth, revealing white teeth which gleamed when she smiled. They envied her the long fall of red- gold hair which framed her cheeks and hung about her shoulders.

The women—many of them older than herself— liked the way the blue-green of her tee-shirt went so well with the colour of her hair. The men, young fathers, husbands of the women beside them, appreciated the fit of that tee-shirt and the way it enhanced the attractions of the shape beneath.

Most of all her audience liked what she had been saying. 'Come rain or shine, we'll win,' she said, her voice ringing with challenge. 'The local authority can do its worst. They can come and bulldoze the building if they like, but I promise you that Rob Bowes and I will go on teaching your children even among the rubble they leave behind.'

The girl paused for the clapping of hands. 'We'll fight this battle together,' she finished. 'Together we'll save our school!'

She sat down, then rose at once to acknowledge the burst of applause. The small-built, white-haired man at the end of the front row beamed his approval. He looked round the audience as if to say, 'Isn't she a fine girl, my granddaughter? You just can't help admiring her fighting spirit!'

'She'll win, don't you worry,' he said to the man next to him. 'Katrine won't let them close our school.'

Katrine bowed, hoping no one had guessed how nervous she had been. Her eyes roamed over the audience. She vowed that with Rob Bowes' help she would fight to the finish. She must not let these people down. They were the parents, and some of them grandparents, of the children under her own and Rob's care.

No doubt the old people remembered the days when, as children, they had attended the village school. They were probably as determined as she was to make sure that their grandchildren retained the right to go on attending that school, however old the building might now be.

One man—in his mid-thirties, she guessed—was seated alone at the back. Something about him, an air of remoteness, of detachment, of an almost Clinical observation, made him stand out from all the others.

Katrine frowned. Not only had he not joined in the applause, he somehow seemed out of place. There was an island of empty chairs around him, as if he had deliberately separated himself from the 'common herd', as Katrine was certain he regarded the other members of the audience.

He sat a little sideways on his seat. It seemed as though his height was such that he was forced by it to compress his body into the relatively small space afforded by the rows of linked chairs. His elbow rested on the chair back while his fingers pressed against his cheek. Even though the length of the hall separated them, Katrine could discern the hard look in his eyes, the uncompromising set of his mouth, the square, obstinate chin.

With a shock she realised that, for the few moments in which she had been studying him, the chatter and bustle of the audience had receded. It had been as though there were only two of them present—herself and the dark-haired man in the back row. Katrine coloured, realising that the man had not only been conscious of her scrutiny, but had been amused by it and coolly returned it.

To counteract any impression she might have given that he held any interest for her, she turned sharply and walked, head high, step decisive, to Rob Bowes. He was gathering together his notes—he too had addressed the audience—and smiled warmly at Katrine as she approached.

'You did well,' he said. 'You had them with you all the way.'

'So did you, Rob.'

'Ah, but,' the warmth in his smile deepened, 'I don't have your assets—sweetness, femininity, not to mention that cloud of golden-red hair.'

She laughed, shuffling the notes in her hand.

'Katrine, love,' her grandfather climbed agilely on to the platform, 'you're a great girl, lassie.' He put his hand on her forearm. 'You'll win, see if you don't. With all this lot supporting you,' he motioned to the slowly departing audience, 'you can't fail.'

Katrine's glance followed her grandfather's—only to find that her eyes were ensnared yet again by the man at the back of the hall. He was standing now and Katrine knew she had been right about his height—he had more of it than he knew what to do with. He towered above all the other men present, his clothes were better tailored, his bearing held more authority—in fact, he was literally head and shoulders above every other member of his own sex in that hall.

'Grandfather,' Katrine murmured into his ear, 'there's- a man near the exit door I've never seen before. Somehow, he—well, he doesn't seem to fit in. I've a feeling he doesn't agree with everything we're saying. I did notice he didn't applaud with all the others.'

Her grandfather turned to face the dispersing audience. After one glance at the man, he turned back. 'You wouldn't expect him to agree, dear. It's Moran, the--'

'The Enemy,' Rob Bowes cut in worriedly, 'with a capital "E". So he's back now.'

'Chairman of the Education Committee,' her grandfather explained.

'In other words, the man who virtually makes the decisions,' Rob enlarged, 'because the rest of the committee nearly always follow his lead.'

'But why haven't I seen him before?' Katrine asked bewilderedly.

'Been abroad,' her grandfather replied, 'on business of his own. He's a big man in his own line. Owns a few factories. Owns a Rolls, too,' he whispered, 'so he doesn't exactly have to count his pennies.'

'Up to now,' Rob went on, 'we've been dealing with his deputy.'

'Ah, now I see,' said Katrine, 'why no one would commit themselves about the school. They've been awaiting the return of the man with all the influence—where education in the county is concerned anyway.'

'Right,' Rob answered.

'So it's up to *him*, is it,' Katrine went on, 'whether or not our school survives? Which means he holds the whip hand--'

Her grandfather's 'sh-sh!' came just too late to stop her.

'I do indeed, Miss Hume.' How did he know her name? Then Katrine remembered. It had been on the poster advertising the public meeting.

So the man with the power, the unsympathetic spectator who had refused to applaud when she had finished speaking, had come to join them. He had mounted the platform so quietly they had not known he was there.

The newcomer held out his hand. 'How are you keeping, Thomas?'

'Good to see you 'back among us, Mr Moran.' Thomas Hume put his smaller, frailer hand into the outstretched one, shaking it as if he meant it. 'I'm fine, thanks.'

Katrine stared. Her grandfather friendly with the 'Enemy'? How *could* he shake the hand of the man who had the means to close the doors of the village school for ever?

'I see,' the man commented, eyeing Katrine with a narrow, slightly ironic look, 'that the village has acquired at least one new inhabitant while I've been out of the country.'

Thomas responded quickly to the veiled request for an introduction. 'Meet my granddaughter, Katrine, Mr Moran. She's the new teacher at the school,' he added with pride.

'So I gathered from her speech,' said Lex Moran. He held out his hand. 'Shall we be formal, Miss Hume?' So he was forcing her to put on a show of cordiality, was he? Well, she would shake his hand, but only because custom required it. She did so, but not even the beginnings of a smile sweetened her wide, inviting mouth.

Lex Moran smiled, however, although there was precious little warmth to soften the hard, full lips. 'I compliment you on your granddaughter, Thomas. A fighter, it seems,' with a speculative glance at her flushed face, 'as outspoken and candid as she's attractive.'

Katrine's flush deepened at the man's edged flattery, but her grandfather laughed. 'I won't argue with you, Mr Moran. I'm proud of my granddaughter. I'm glad to have her living with me for a while. My son and his wife live way up north. Katrine takes after her mother, my daughter-in-law, in looks, but there's one way at least she's like her father, my son Eddie—she's blunt.' He laughed again. 'She doesn't mince her words, I can tell you!'

'Then they must both get it from you, Thomas,' Lex Moran smiled. 'You're as plain-speaking as they come. So now it seems,' again his eyes swung to the girl facing him, her head held defiantly high, 'that we've got another Hume among us. And a fighter, too.'

Katrine's defiance tightened her smile. 'Shouldn't you really have said "trouble-maker", Mr Moran?'

'You're challenging me, Miss Hume?' Dark, well-shaped eyebrows rose. 'I'll match your bluntness. Yes, if you prefer, trouble-maker. I've dealt with many during my time as a county councillor.'

'I tremble to contemplate your methods of dealing with those "trouble-makers", Mr Moran.' Her provocative smile counteracted the apprehension implied in the words, and with jubilation she noted the tightening of her opponent's lips.

'Yes, well,' said Rob Bowes, shuffling his notes and speaking for the first time since Lex Moran joined them, 'I'm quite sure Mr Moran, in his position as Education Committee chairman will act in the village's best interests, Katrine. Won't you, Mr Moran?'

'Believe it or not, I always have, Mr Bowes. Miss Hume would probably not know that, being a newcomer to the area. No doubt her grandfather will enlighten her.'

Thomas Hume laughed. 'Yes, well, we haven't always been on the same side of the fence, policy-wise, have we, Mr Moran?'

'Meaning that whatever you might tell her about me may be prejudiced?' Lex Moran laughed shortly, then gazed narrowly at the girl they were discussing. 'Judging by the look on her face, I doubt whether anything you might say about me could possibly prejudice your granddaughter against me more than she already is.' His eyes moved to the posters pinned to the tables on the platform. ' "Save Our School", ' he read aloud. ' "Protect our children's future". "To every village a school of its own". '

Infuriated by the amusement in his voice, Katrine retorted, 'How can you be so cynical about something so important? It's obvious you haven't got any children of your own, Mr Moran.' In her anger, she ignored Bob's agitated movements and her grandfather's worried frown. 'If you had, you would agree with what those posters say. And you would have applauded at the end of the meeting with everyone else!'

'Katrine, dear,' her grandfather said anxiously, 'I really think you should be just a little more--' He seemed uncomfortable about finishing the sentence.

'Discreet is the word I think your grandfather was going to use, Miss Hume.' To Thomas he said, 'Don't worry. Let your granddaughter have her say. I'm a firm believer in free speech, and you've already warned me she doesn't mince her words. I can admire her for her bluntness, if for nothing else.'

The colour in Katrine's face deepened at the implied insult. Her anger at his cynicism was giving way to something like remorse. Had she gone too far

invoicing her assumption that he had no family? For all she knew, the man could have a wife and six children living in the area.

'I'm sorry,' she said, attempting to sound sincere. 'I had no right--'

'Save your breath, Miss Hume,' Lex Moran said abruptly. 'As it happens, you were correct in assuming I have no family. I'm not even married. However, I was not being cynical about the message on those posters, nor do I disagree with what they say. I merely think you're wasting your time.'

Katrine's chin rose higher. 'We're fighting a battle we intend to win, Mr Moran.'

'To fight a battle you must have an enemy. May I ask who that might be?'

Katrine knew without Rob's agitated signals, that she must speak carefully. 'The local authority.'

'Shouldn't your answer have been the Education Committee? In particular, myself as its chairman.' His smile was touched with malice. 'Come, where's your plain speaking now?' He looked at his watch. 'I must go.' With another smile, 'We shall doubtless meet again, Miss Hume. I look forward to it. I dearly love a battle of wits, not to mention a battle of wills, especially when it's with a fiery, stubborn young woman. And remember, by the way, that when you're sharpening your verbal weapons preparatory to making a strategic attack on those in authority, I hold the "whip hand". Your words, Miss Hume, not mine.'

With a brief, smiling salute, he left them.

'All right,' said Katrine, as soon as Lex Moran had left the hall, 'so I was wrong. I was impetuous and hotheaded, tactless and indiscreet.' Her cheeks were scarlet. 'There now,' she looked from her grandfather to Rob Bowes, 'I've said it all for you. But someone had to put the man in his place.'

Rob gestured towards the ceiling. 'Which is up there, so to speak. At the head, at the pinnacle of that authority he spoke about. You've made not just an enemy for yourself, Katrine, but for the whole campaign.'

Her eyes filled. She knew he was right, but she could not control the feeling of self-pity which welled up inside her. 'Okay, so I might have been more tactful, if only for the sake of what we're trying to achieve. But I'm darned if I'm going to fawn around anybody, however much power he wields.'

'But, Katrine,' Rob remonstrated, 'there are times when you have to submerge your personal inclinations, and this is one of them. There's something we all want to achieve and that is preventing the closure of the school. As long as we succeed, what does it matter if we have to abandon our own self-esteem, lower ourselves a little, and even "fawn" as you call it? Once we've won, everything can return to normal--'

Katrine shook her head sharply. 'Once you've lost your self-respect, you've lost it for a lifetime. You'd never forget the time it happened, nor forgive the person who made you lose it.'

'Speak for yourself, Katrine,' said Rob, pushing his papers into his briefcase. 'I for one disagree. And I'm sure that, in a case like this, there'd be a lot of others--'

Thomas Hume saw the warning signs in his granddaughter's face. 'It's no good, Rob, you won't convince her against her will. She's the kind—just like my son, her father—who learns only by experience, bitter though it may be.'

Her eyes moistened at her grandfather's apparent disloyalty. 'Grandfather,' she said, 'haven't I stood here this afternoon, doing my utmost best for the campaign, trying to arouse all the parents to action--'

'All right, dear,' her grandfather soothed, 'don't take everything to heart so. I wasn't criticising you, I was speaking the truth. There-are some things we all have to learn to accept in this life, however unpleasant a taste they might leave in the mouth.'

'And one of those, I suppose, is that if it pays to be servile and cringing to an objectionable, hateful creature like Lex Moran, just because he holds all the aces...'

Rob nodded. 'Then you just have to be cringing and servile. Your grandfather's right, Katrine.'

Her colour high, Katrine said, 'I thought better of you, Rob. I know you're the head teacher of the school, but I didn't know you'd sell your soul just to keep your job!' She swung away, climbing down from the platform. She knew she had been unfair in speaking so petulantly to Rob, but she couldn't help herself. It was as though everyone had turned against her, even her friends.

'She'll come round, Rob,' she heard her grandfather whisper. 'For some reason, Mr Moran's upset her. She seems to have taken an instant dislike to the man, and I'm darned if I know why.'

CHAPTER TWO

As soon as Katrine arrived at the school next morning, a child from the top class ran after her.

'Miss Hume,' the girl said, 'Mr Bowes wants to see you. It's urgent, he said.' She ran off as Katrine thanked her.

Katrine entered the staff room and hung her jacket on a hook. The room was little more than a large cup board with a window. The school was over a hundred years old, and showed its age in every way. Once it must have been overflowing with bright-eyed children born of villagers who tilled the fields and maybe worked for the local squire.

Now it boasted only two small classes. There were two members of staff—herself and Rob Bowes, head of the school, and who also did his share of teaching. It was small, Katrine admitted to herself defensively, of course it was. But while there were children in the village who needed to be taught the school had a right to exist, the local children a right to attend.

Katrine pushed open the door into the tiny office Rob Bowes chose to call his 'study'. He rose as she entered, then immediately sat down again, inviting her to follow his example. He seemed a little agitated, pushing back his light brown hair. He was slim and reasonably tall, but even so, Katrine remembered, he had had to look up to Lex Moran.

'I've had a phone call from the Education Office,' he said bluntly. 'This morning we're being inspected.'

A strange apprehension tautened Katrine's stomach muscles, a frightening presentiment of approaching calamity had her breathing faster. 'At such short notice? That's hardly fair.' There was a growing confusion outside in the corridor, the patter of running feet, raised childish voices. 'Who by?' she pressed. 'A schools inspector?'

'No. Can't you guess?'

'Not——' her mouth went dry, 'not the chairman of the Education Committee?'

'The very same. Mr Lex Moran, the message said, will be paying a visit to the village's primary school this morning. No particular time specified.'

Katrine paled and stood, unable to remain seated at the news. 'Why is *he* coming? To wield the big stick, to let us know—as if we weren't already aware of it—that .our future, and the school's, is in his hands?'

Rob shrugged, 'Who knows? Maybe just curiosity, maybe to see what the fuss is all about.'

Katrine began to speak, but hesitated as the noise outside grew louder. Her instinct was calling her into the corridor to quieten the invading hordes; desire to discuss the situation keeping her where she was.

'What does he want?' she asked acidly. 'Red carpet treatment?'

Rob laughed. 'He'll be lucky if he gets a mat to wipe his feet on! We've had to skimp and scrape for so long, the one doormat we have got is threadbare.'

Katrine said angrily, her voice rising to cover the cries and shouts of temporarily undisciplined children, 'I wish he'd mind his own business and let us get on with what we're paid to do. We're the teachers, the professionals. He might be a big name in industry, but where education is concerned, he's no more than an amateur.'

Katrine could see that she did not have the whole of Rob's attention, but she persisted, 'What does he know about running a village school? It's a specialist job. Why should he set himself above us? We know what we're doing, yet he thinks he can dictate to us about how we should run our own establishment, or even whether we should be running it at all.'

The more she developed her argument, the warmer her cheeks became and the more irritated her voice grew. She wished Rob would look at her instead of staring blankly at his blotter.

'What,' she demanded indignantly, hoping to catch his attention again, 'does any councillor know about teaching? Just think of what they were—or still are— before they became elected as councillors. Butchers, bakers...'

'Candlestick-makers?' The cold voice from the door sent an excruciating shock coursing to earth through her slender body. 'Or even, lowest of the low, industrialists?'

Now Katrine knew the reason for Rob's strange embarrassment as she had talked. Her back had been to the door. He, however, had known that they had a visitor.

She had not known and had therefore continued to talk uninhibitedly and critically about people whose standing locally—like that of the man who had come unannounced into the headmaster's room—was deeply respected by the village's inhabitants.

Rob Bowes had risen, hand extended, his candid features unable to disguise the embarrassment brought about by his one and only member of staff's indiscreet tongue. 'Mr Moran, we were expecting you. Please take a seat.'

The headmaster's study, however, contained only one visitor's chair. Since Katrine had sunk back into it in her surprise and dismay, the visitor rubbed his chin, appearing to consider the matter. He seemed to be tossing up in his mind the relative virtues of adhering to the rules of social politeness and telling the young woman—who occupied the seat to stay where she was, or claiming his rights as a VIP and requesting the use of the chair she was occupying. A narrow look invaded his steel-grey eyes. He had plainly come to a decision.

'Miss Hume? If you would be so kind as to vacate the visitor's chair and allow me to--'

'Katrine?' Rob cleared his throat. 'Would you--?'

Furious at the newcomer's veiled implication that, as a mere member of staff she was behaving discourteously to a visitor, and with herself for failing to

anticipate Rob's request, Katrine coloured deeply and jerked herself from the wooden chair so hard it toppled over.

Far from diving to rescue it, Lex Moran stood watching, with some amusement, as Katrine bent to right the chair. With a stiff, reluctant gesture, she indicated that the chair was now his to occupy. This he did, with a brief nod, lowering his considerable length into it and crossing his immaculately-clad legs.

Not a single word of thanks, Katrine thought angrily, as the visitor turned to Rob. 'I assume the chief education officer rang you from the Education Office? I asked him to do so.'

'Yes, indeed, Mr Moran. I--' Rob checked himself and with his eyes indicated to Katrine that she should leave.

Lex Moran, however, plainly had no intention of sparing her feelings. His look reduced her to the size of a piece of chalk that had snapped in half. 'Forgive me, Miss Hume,' he said, 'for speaking with that bluntness for which, it seems, you have a reputation, but isn't it time you got on with the job for which you're paid? Judging by the noise the mob outside is making, your services are urgently required on the other side of that door.'

Katrine bristled. 'I'm perfectly aware of where my duty lies--' She checked herself and drew a breath.

No, she could not, for Rob's sake, for the sake of the future of the school, answer this man as she longed to be able to do. She drew a deep breath, opened her lips to apologise, saw the mocking glint in the eyes of the visitor and closed her mouth tightly.

He had won the point, and he knew it, but even so, her indignation at his cool dismissal was slow to diminish. Moments later, with her back to the door which she had snapped shut behind her, she searched for her lost composure. It took only a few seconds for her balance to be restored, infusing her with sufficient drive to assert her authority and stop the deaf-making shrieks of infant youth run wild.

It was just before the mid-morning break, when the children's excess energies had accumulated to explosive point, that the door of the classroom opened. Before her head turned and Katrine saw the dark-haired man who entered, she knew who the newcomer would be.

There was no time to analyse her feelings at his arrival. All Katrine knew was that her heart began to race. Her breathing quickened and her cheeks grew warm. This must be, she thought confusedly, how a soldier must have felt in bygone days when the signal to charge the enemy had been given. Except that, however much it irritated, she had to remain in her place at the front of the class and treat her particular 'enemy' with the courtesy and servility usually accorded to a visitor. Lex Moran closed the door and nodded coolly to Katrine, but try as she might she could not summon a smile in greeting. He slipped his hands into his well-tailored trouser pockets and awaited events.

Remembering her role as teacher, Katrine turned to the nine or ten children in front of her. However much it irked her, she knew what her next task must be.

'Stand up, children,' she said in her most clipped 'schoolteacher' voice. Slowly and noisily, they complied. '*A very important person* has come to see us.' Her smile was unnaturally bright and this she turned on the newcomer. But if she expected to encounter in his expression annoyance at her sarcastic emphasis, she was disappointed. The merest hint of sardonic amusement pulled at his lips, then his expression returned to its former unreadable watchfulness.

'Now say "good morning",' she told them.

'Good morning, Mr Moran,' they intoned. As she listened she remembered she had forgotten to tell them his name. So how did they know? By the way some of them smiled at him, it was plain that the man was no stranger. To be known by such small members of the village community, she reflected sarcastically as they resumed their seats, Lex Moran must have distributed his patronage and benevolence with a condescension and graciousness worthy of olden times.

The children settled surprisingly easily and seemed to accept him without question or any desire to show off in the presence of the visitor. It might be, Katrine thought, simply because they knew him. But, a voice inside whispered, even that would not be sufficient if, also, they did not like him. The thought provoked a recurrence of her irritation.

It showed in her teaching, in the sharpness in her voice as she set out sums on the blackboard. Twice she made mistakes which one or two of the older ones—it was a mixed-age class because of the smallness of the school—immediately pointed out, shooting up their hands in triumph.

By the time the bell rang for the mid-morning break, Katrine's cheeks were flushed and her heart beating painfully. Her visitor, who had remained standing, now had a stick with which to beat her, if he so desired—her incompetence as a teacher of small children.

As the class gathered in an excited crowd, all trying to be the first to get out, Lex Moran did not move from his position near the door. Katrine was as anxious as the children to remove herself from the 'very important person's' presence, but unlike them, she had to hide her impatience until the last child had gone.

As she said 'Please excuse me,' to the visitor, his hand came out, detaining her. His touch on her bare arm—she wore a simple summer dress—made the flesh tingle. She wanted desperately to jerk free. For the sake of the campaign, however, she tolerated the hand which at that moment held her loosely but which, she was convinced, could if the necessity arose, grip painfully hard to achieve its objective.

'Wait a moment, Miss Hume.' His eyes were cool and impartial, but he did not release her. Had he sensed her distaste at his touch, and was he, in retaining his hold on her, aiming to annoy?

'Are there usually nine children in your class, or are there absentees?'

'No, they're all here.' If her answers were short and to the point, would release from him come more quickly? 'But this isn't just my class. Rob—Mr Bowes—and I share the two classes, teaching them different subjects.'

He smiled and Katrine's heart acted strangely. 'And arithmetic's not your strong point?'

So she had been correct in thinking he would hold her errors against her. 'I don't usually make mistakes in adding up,' she snapped. 'Don't judge my ability to teach on what you saw and heard today. It was--'

She looked up at him, seeing his face for the first time in disturbing detail. Determination was there, obstinacy and a refusal ever to admit defeat—all these characteristics were scrawled across his face like words chalked on a blackboard by a careless hand.

But it was the sardonic, slightly cruel look in his eyes which had her heart beating painfully and which, together with his touch, aroused in her a strange, deep-down animosity which no one in her position—that of wanting his support and plainly considerable influence exerted on her behalf—should ever experience, let alone admit to.

'Please go on,' he invited, smiling slightly. It was a smile Katrine instinctively mistrusted.

'It was you,' she blurted out, unable to tame her customary bluntness. 'You standing there watching everything I did, listening to everything I said.'

He released her at last. 'Thanks for telling me, Miss Hume,' he returned, his smile deepening. 'Now I know that I have only to make an appearance to throw you off balance. It's a piece of knowledge which may well prove useful some time.' He motioned to the corridor. 'Don't let me keep you. By the screams out there, your calming influence on the infant hordes is obviously badly needed.'

For the third time that morning, he was implying that she was not adequately fulfilling her role as a teacher. She swung from him and made her way into the playground.

It was mid-June, but the skies were overcast and Katrine shivered. The children were playing quietly. Could she dash to the staff room and collect

her jacket? In a moment the decision was made and acted upon. The jacket was on a chair and she seized it, • pulling it on as she went.

As she stepped outside she was met by a series of shrieks from high-pitched male voices and thumps from miniature male fists. But, as she saw to her dismay, not only had a fight erupted out of the peace she had left behind, but a man—a lean, hard-eyed man— was striding towards the boys. His jacket was unbuttoned despite the chill in the air, his tie blowing in the breeze.

He saw her. 'Miss Hume,' he called, 'not only do you specialise in making arithmetical mistakes and confusing youthful, untutored minds, you also neglect your spell of playground duty. Either you separate that little lot with your feminine tact and persuasion, or I use my masculine brute force and do it for you. If you're not quick, they'll tear each other's hair out!'

There was no time to remonstrate with him that she had been absent for barely two minutes, nor to explain why. She raced towards the two small specimens of manhood who were locked in desperate battle like stags, antlers entwined, fighting with desperation to preserve their domination over their own particular collection of hinds.

She dived into the circle and grabbed an arm with each hand. She tugged on the two arms until the owners of them realised that a third party had made an irritating appearance. One of the small boys wore glasses, which, miraculously, had stayed in place. The boys disengaged from each other, breathing deeply, their faces scarlet, their eyes carrying on the fight which, of necessity, had temporarily to be abandoned. The wearer of the spectacles, however, was so incensed at being deprived of the victory which he considered had been within his grasp, he turned on the innocent but interfering third party and hit out at her with fists and feet.

Katrine defended herself as well as she could, but against such a fury of flailing arms and legs, and with the pain which increased with every blow, she became increasingly helpless. Her driving instinct was to hit back, but the child maltreating her was in her charge. In his rage he probably didn't even know what he was doing. So she clenched her teeth and used her voice instead of her hands, hoping to reason him into a calmer frame of mind.

The rain of blows ceased as suddenly as they had started. It had not been her verbal protests nor her appeal to the child's better nature which had brought a stop to the assault. Someone, somehow, had removed the child bodily from her. Lex Moran had him across one shoulder in a fireman's lift and had delivered him to Rob Bowes, who had come to the door to see what the noise was all about.

Lex Moran then returned to Katrine, who stood, shaken, hair awry, rubbing herself all over in a vain attempt to ease the pain. She was dazed, but would not admit it and started to walk towards the school building. Then her legs turned traitor and she found herself crouching, head down, to prevent a faint.

Lex Moran crouched beside her, pushing her head even farther down. 'It's shock,' he said, waited a moment then asked, 'Any better?'

She nodded, wishing she could remove the pressure of his hand. For the second time that morning his touch was making her shiver. Why couldn't the man get out of her life and leave her alone?

He straightened, put his hand under her armpits and lifted her. Before she could guess his intention, she was scooped into his arms and swung across, the playground and into the school. She knew she should be expressing her thanks, but all she could force out was, 'You've done your good deed, Mr Moran. Please put me down. I'm all right now.'

Even to her own ears, her gratitude sounded sour, but he ignored her words, looking around irritably. 'Isn't there a rest room in this primitive shack of a place? Is there nowhere I can put you for a rest?'

If only her head would stay upright instead of flopping against his shoulder. If only his back beneath her clutching hand did not feel so solid and strong and dependable!

'There's the floor,' she murmured. 'Put me there.' She pulled her head upright in a faint movement of challenge. 'Then you can trample over me as much as you like.' The treacherous head fell back against the cushioning shoulder.

'It will have to be the chair,' she heard him murmur. He lowered her feet to the ground, his arm still around her waist. A wailing kind of cry came through into the staff room and Katrine stiffened, her head coming up, her eyes staring into the puzzled eyes of the man beside her.

'That's Andy Brown. Rob's punishing him!'

'He fully deserves everything he's getting, the little--' Katrine jerked from the restraining arm and made for the door. 'Where the hell are you going, Miss Hume?'

The cold voice did not deter her. 'He mustn't,' she said, 'he absolutely mustn't.'

'Surely you can leave it to the head teacher to know what he's doing?'

Katrine shook her head frantically. 'You don't know the child's background. His parents have split up and neither of them wants him. He's living with an aunt who doesn't want him, either.'

Disregarding the pain of her injuries, she sped along the corridor to Rob Bowes' room, bursting in. Andy Brown stood, palms to his eyes, sobbing his heart out, while Rob sat at the desk.

'Have you touched him?' Katrine cried.

Rob held up his hands. 'With these? No. But I hope I've succeeded in making him feel no bigger than an insect. The child lost control completely, and as for what he did to you--'

'Apologise to Miss Hume, Andy Brown.' The hard voice came from the doorway. 'Say you're sorry, or I personally will--'

Katrine swung round, her eyes on fire. 'You won't!' She did not care about speaking with such disrespect to a highly respected member of the education service.

Lex Moran strode across to the boy and stood, hands on hips, towering over him. 'Say you're sorry to her, or—'

The boy's crying started again. Katrine raced to him, her instinct to protect the child getting the better of her judgment. She insinuated herself between man and boy and put her hands against Lex Moran's chest, pushing him away. She ignored the warning flash of fire _ which ignited in the cool grey eyes. Then she crouched down and wrapped her arms about the sobbing child, holding him close, feeling his tears dampening her shoulder.

'I'm—I'm sorry, M-Miss Hume,' the high-pitched voice whispered. 'I—I'm s-sorry for hurting you.'

'All right, all right now,' she pacified, stroking his hair, then putting him from her and drying his eyes with a tissue. His glasses had fallen to the floor and she reached out, picked them up and replaced them on the child's nose. 'Better now?' He nodded slowly. 'Then off you go.'

The spectacles gave the child an appealingly owlish look as he glanced uncertainly from one to the other. Deciding no further reprimands would come his way, he made for the door and disappeared through it into the playground.

The laughter and shouts of children still playing broke the silence within the room. Now it was Katrine who felt she was the culprit and had committed some unnamed crime. And it was she who now raised her head and looked first at Rob, then at their visitor, as if daring them to criticise her for her humane action.

Lex Moran's expression was unreadable and she trembled inside at her audacity in pushing him away—in touching him at all. If she did not apologise, would he now threaten her as he had Andy Brown?

To her intense astonishment and relief, he broke into a smile. It was sardonic and mocking, but it was a smile. 'If I were to hurl myself on you and assault you like Andy Brown, would you take me in your arms, no matter how much I hurt you, Miss Hume, and comfort me?'

She had to smile, even if the vision of Lex Moran held fast in her arms did disturb her inordinately, stirring in her strange feelings to which, until that moment, she had been a complete stranger.

A faintness hit her and her head spun. She put a hand to it and closed her eyes.

'Sit down, Katrine,' Rob said urgently. 'It's shaken you up more than you realised.'

He came round the desk and pushed the chair forward, helping her into it. After a few moments, Lex Moran asked, 'Can you spare her for the rest of the morning, Mr Bowes?'

Katrine took her hand from her head. 'I'm not leaving the school. There's nothing wrong with me. I can't leave Rob to cope--'

'With twenty-eight kids, Katrine? Come on, some teachers have to deal with classes of forty children. I can manage three-quarters of that number without--'

'Rob!' He had been trying to help her, but his very words were giving the visitor—the enemy—ammunition to use against them.

The visitor, whose ability to read between the lines and even the words was not in doubt, had probably heard all he wanted to know anyway, without her agonised interruption.

'Come on, Miss Hume,' said Lex Moran. He indicated the door. 'This way.'

'I'm not going home, Mr Moran. I refuse to worry my grandfather with such a trivial matter as a few bruises.'

A thin layer of ice coated his expression. 'In that case, Miss Hume,' he said, 'I suggest you return to your duties. If your injuries are so trivial, as you put it, then they won't prevent you from calling in the children and taking on two classes, while I continue my discussion with the head teacher.'

Katrine stared at him in dismay. He must know that although the damage inflicted by Andy Brown was not serious, the pain from it remained. The prospect of standing in front of a class and, moreover, walking between classrooms and keeping both sets of children quiet alarmed her.

'But, Mr Moran, my--' My bruises are throbbing, she had been going to say, but that would have meant going back on her statement that they were trivial, and also playing on this hard man's pity—not that he had any, she thought acidly.

She gritted her teeth, rose and limped to the door.

'Katrine--' Rob's voice, uncertain yet worried, did not stop her from making a dignified, if slightly pathetic exit.

After half an hour of trying to teach two classes at once, Katrine gave both classes a series of subjects to draw, and limped off to the staff cloakroom. The throb of the bruises had increased—probably as a result of so much walking about. She decided that the least she could do was to bathe them.

At the wash basin she drew out a handkerchief and with the use of cold water, which stung, wiped away the congealed blood.

'What's this, a do-it-yourself outpatients' department?'

The caustic tone had her straightening. 'I'm only doing for myself what I do so often for many of the children.' Her tone was defensive, which annoyed her, because whenever this particular man appeared she much preferred to be on the attack.

He looked disparagingly at the way she dampened her handkerchief, then wiped the grazes on her knees. '*This* is the way you attend children's cuts and bruises? It's a wonder they don't all die of septicaemia. If you carry on like that, you might even get it yourself.'

'Me, get blood poisoning? How?'

He moved towards the first aid cabinet. 'By using a none-too-clean handkerchief to cleanse your wounds instead of the contents of this.' He opened the door marked with a red cross and his breath hissed through his teeth. 'Empty.' He swung round. 'Not a bandage, not a packet of dressing or healing cream in sight. Who's responsible for keeping this supplied? It can only be you—it's hardly a head teacher's job.'

She rinsed out her handkerchief, keeping her back to him. 'All right, it's my responsibility. But,' she rounded on him, 'it's not my fault that, because of the economies that have been forced on us by the local authority, we don't have enough money to keep the first aid cupboard filled.'

'So now you're blaming me?'

She paused, but disregarded the discretion which urged her to be careful. 'You're a councillor, you're the chairman of the Education Committee, so yes, I suppose in a way I am blaming you.'

There was a small silence and she looked up defiantly, seeing the tight line of his lips.

'Your blame is wrongly directed, Miss Hume. It's my job, as chairman of the Education Committee and together with that committee, to see that education in this county gets its fair share of the money available. But it's not mine to keep a first aid cabinet adequately supplied. That is yours.' A taunting smile teased his lips. 'A comforting kiss and cuddle, such as you gave your youthful assailant, Andy Brown, won't alas heal wounds or kill germs. Nor, if I applied to you the same medicine as you applied to him,' the smile broadened and Katrine grew warm, 'would it stop those bruises on your legs hurting and help those grazes he inflicted to get better. So while I go and ask Rob Bowes to take over where you left off, get your things together. And,' he held up his hand, checking the arguments she was mustering, 'if you're awkward again, I'll *carry* you to my car in front of the whole school. That would give the village something to talk about, wouldn't it, when those kids got home and told their parents?'

With that parting shot, he left her. Katrine limped through to the staff room, found her handbag and jacket and limped to the door. As he came to collect

her, she gritted her teeth and made an enormous effort to walk normally. Any pain, she thought, rather than be scooped into those arms for the second time that morning.

Lex Moran's car stood at the kerb like a sleek white borzoi dog, faithfully awaiting its master's return.

'Ever been in a Rolls-Royce, Miss Hume?' Lex asked. 'No? Well you're now going to add another "first" to the other experiences in your life.' He opened the front passenger door and helped her in.

Katrine wondered where he was taking her, but lacked the courage to ask. The drive was luxurious in the extreme but to her disappointment very short. He pulled up in front of the chemist's shop in the village. 'Since the doctor's no doubt out on his rounds,' Lex Moran said, 'I've brought you to the next best place.'

'The chemist's shop? But they don't treat injuries here. They sell the plasters and bandages and so on, but...'

'Here, Miss Hume,' her companion said softly, 'they will do anything for me.'

Still puzzled, Katrine eased herself from the car. A few passers-by looked with interest first at herself, then at the man beside her. Even without the tale of the local schoolteacher being carried in the arms of a local Very Important Person, tongues would soon be wagging, Katrine reflected a little sourly.

The shop doorbell rang as Lex Moran opened it and stood back while Katrine limped past him. 'Don't wait at the counter,' he directed. 'Go round the back.'

'But it's not usual--"Will you do as I say for once?" He slipped his arm into hers and supported her into the dispensary behind the shop. Two young women were there, one bespectacled and brown-haired, the other tall, slim, long-lashed and blonde. Both of them were known to Katrine. The first girl she liked, the other she tolerated because she had no other choice.

The brown-haired girl smiled. 'Morning, Mr Moran.' He nodded in response. 'Hurt yourself, Miss Hume?' she asked sympathetically. 'Fallen over at school?'

'Well, yes, Pat--' Katrine began, but Lex Moran interrupted.

'No. A boy kicked and punched her.'

Katrine turned on him. 'Will you be--'

Lex Moran smiled broadly. 'The child shall be nameless.'

Pat returned to the shop. The blonde had not stopped her work. She was counting out pills, consulting doctor's prescriptions, measuring liquid into bottles, but all the time she was smiling. Her name, Katrine knew, was Lara Holland. She also knew the girl was a qualified pharmacist and possessed enough mental ability to have gone much higher up the medical ladder had she so desired.

Lex Moran helped Katrine to a chair then went to stand behind Lara Holland. As Katrine watched, Lara's body tensed visibly and she gazed up into Lex Moran's face with a smile touched with intimacy. 'Hello, Lex,' she said, and he returned her smile. 'What are you after? As if I---' She stopped, seeming to remember that they were not alone. Now Katrine knew what Lex Moran had meant when he said, 'Here they will do anything for me.'

Katrine could not understand the twang of pain which pulled like the hands of a harpist at the threads of her nervous system. All right, she told herself severely, so these two were very good friends. They were having an affair, they were even sleeping--

'Miss Hume here--' Was Lex Moran's voice deliberately loud in order to attract her attention, as if in fact he had intercepted her thoughts? 'has suffered physical damage at the hands of one of her little angels. Knowing well the softness of your touch, not to mention your ability to heal wounds,' they exchanged smiles, 'I wondered if you would mind downing tools—or should I say pills?—for a moment, and tending her injuries.'

The girl went to the wash basin and soaped her hands. 'Anything you say, Lex,' she said.

While she cleansed Katrine's wounds, she talked to Lex Moran. Whenever she was forced to address Katrine, she did so sharply and with a blank face. Both of Katrine's legs had suffered from Andy Brown's onslaught, and by the time Lara Holland had finished, there were a series of plasters stretching from ankles to knees.

'Keep them dry for a day or two,' Lara said coldly, 'then they should have healed enough to remove the * plasters and let nature do the rest. The bruises will heal themselves.'

'It's very kind of you,' Katrine said tonelessly. 'I know it's not really your job--'

'I did it for Mr Moran,' Lara returned, smiling up at him and finding that once again he returned the smile.

'Yes, when Mr Moran brought me here,' Katrine responded tartly, 'he said that you would do anything for him.' Her head lifted in defiance as Lex Moran's eyes took on the glint of steel. 'But,' her smile was sugar-sweet, 'I really am grateful to you.'

Katrine found herself looking into a second pair of cold eyes, but these quickly swung from her to seek the hard grey eyes above her. 'I'm busy tonight, Lex, but tomorrow evening I'm--'

Lex shook his head. 'Up to my neck in work, Lara. I've been away a heck of a time.'

The girl's face clouded and she looked down at her work. 'But, Lex, I--' Her voice tailed off.

Katrine—almost—felt sorry for her. For a woman to fall for this man—and it was clear that Lara Holland had indeed done that—would be the height of folly. Anyway, she had herself long ago decided that no man would ever

take precedence over her life's work, her career as a teacher. Which meant that men like Lex Moran would never, ever, be able to hurt her.

'Where do you live, Miss Hume?'

Lex Moran's abrupt question achieved two things. It put Lara Holland firmly in her place and it took the reflective, faintly smug smile from Katrine's face.

Summoning her dignity, she stood. It wasn't easy, but she managed it. 'I'm not going home, Mr Moran. I should be obliged if you would take me back to the school.'

'Lara,' the girl turned, 'where does Miss Hume live? You must have made up prescriptions for her or her grandfather in the few months she's been here.'

With a small, spiteful smile, Lara told him.

'Thanks,' he said. He strode across to Katrine, swung her into his arms for the second time that day and walked with her into the shop. It was full of customers. They stared, open-mouthed.

To Katrine's immense chagrin, Lex Moran stopped, it was as though he intended to draw as much attention as possible to the situation. As he spoke, however, her fears were put at rest. 'Wounded heroine,' he told the assembled crowd. 'Our pretty young schoolteacher got herself hurt in the course of her work. If I'm not careful, I'll have her grandfather on to me claiming damages on her behalf!'

The customers laughed and nodded understandingly. But the last thing Katrine saw as she was swung out of the shop door was the white, jealous face of the girl who, at Lex Moran's bidding, had tended her injuries.

CHAPTER THREE

THE Rolls-Royce slid from the kerb and moved along the main street. After a moment's thought, Katrine informed her companion that her grandfather's house would be empty.

'So you might as well take me back to the school.' She could not suppress the small smile at her victory.

'Right.' The wheel spun, the car turned left. He's taking me back to the school! she thought delightedly.

But moments later her delight turned into anger, then into apprehension. 'I said,' she spoke with as much decision as she could muster, 'that I want to go back to the school.'

Now the man beside her smiled. 'I'm not one of your schoolkids, Miss Hume. You can't order me about.'

'Where--' She cleared her throat, annoyed at the waver in her voice. 'Where are you taking me?'

'Home, Miss Hume,' he replied smoothly, 'my home. In the circumstances, any home will do. What's more, mine won't be empty.'

Katrine struggled forward against the sloping luxury of the leather-covered seat. 'You can't take me there against my will! I demand--'

'Save your breath. In two minutes, we'll be there.'

They were progressing along a tree-lined drive. 'But this is the way to Charton House.'

. 'Full marks, teacher.'

'Well,' she said, annoyed into retaliation by his mocking amusement, 'you may have bought the oldest, most illustrious dwelling in the district, but you can't claim you actually belong, can you? I mean,' she glanced at his profile

and noted with pleasure the tightening of his lips, 'it wasn't your ancestors who built the house nearly three hundred years ago and gave their name to it and also the village.'

'Neither do you belong, Miss Hume,' he said quietly. 'At least I've lived here for eight years. You've been here—how long?—five months?'

For the moment she was silenced. The car tyres crunched along the drive and stopped in front of the entrance door.

The grandeur of the exterior was daunting. 'I've never been inside such a house,' she said, thinking aloud. 'But then,' her large, frank eyes turned to his, 'neither have I been in such a car.'

'Nor, I take it, have you ever been used as a punch-ball by a small boy. A lot of firsts today, Miss Hume,' He spoke mockingly. 'Let me help you out.'

Visions of being swept off her feet yet again into those powerful arms had her frantically searching for the door catch. Before she could find it, the door swung open and she was being helped out of the car.

'This is not the original building,' Lex told her as he led her, hand cupping her elbow, into the entrance hall. 'That was unfortunately destroyed by fire, and this building replaced it. It was built by the Charton family just over two hundred years ago. It's solidly built and functional—none of your painted ceilings and wall tapestries and coats of arms. It's an unpretentious, small country residence.'

Katrine thought of her grandfather's terrace house, with its two bedrooms, living-room and kitchen. She said incredulously, '*Small?*'

He looked down at her, smiling and putting out a hand as if pressing against a brick wall. 'I feel the barriers rising between us. Does where a man lives matter so much?'

She looked around, noting the carved and gilded ceiling, the decorated archways, the valuable paintings, all of which he seemed to take for granted, even calling the place 'unpretentious'.

'When it reflects the high level on which he exists compared with the rest of the community, when it displays the priceless articles with which he surrounds himself every day, and when it reveals the extent of his wealth? Yes,' she looked up at him, 'it does matter.'

'Your eyes are as frank as your words,' he said, smiling. 'Please follow me.'

The comparative simplicity which greeted her as she entered his sitting-room took her by surprise. The simplicity was an illusion, however, because on closer inspection the quality of the furniture, the leather upholstery of the sighingly-comfortable armchairs and settee, the shining wood, the ornaments, the chandeliers, was unmistakable.

'You like my way of life after all, Miss Hume?' he mocked. He gestured. 'My chairs are opening their arms to welcome you. Why not accept their invitation?'

Katrine limped across the deep-tufted carpet and sank into brown-leathered luxury.

'A drink?' She shook her head. 'Coffee then?'

'No, thank you.'

He went to a cabinet, opened the doors and helped himself to a drink. 'So you refuse my hospitality?'

'Yes.'

'Honest as they come, aren't you?' He occupied the other armchair, drank and put his glass down. With his legs fully stretched and his head against the chair- back, he studied his guest from the top of her head to her tightly-crossed ankles.

If he means to make me feel uncomfortable, Katrine thought, I won't be, I just won't! But she was, intensely so. The narrowed, reflective gaze dwelt with unveiled masculine interest on her hair, which she pushed agitatedly from her face. It moved to her lips, which she pressed together.

Uninhibitedly he studied her shape, which she endeavoured to cover with her jacket.

Something seemed to amuse him—her discomfiture probably, she thought acidly—and he smiled, but the amusement passed and he asked, 'How are your bruises?'

'Not too bad, thanks.'

'You don't feel any animosity towards the child who inflicted them?'

'None at all. He felt he had to kick out at something, and I suppose I was the nearest thing. Life's treated him pretty roughly, and he's still not yet seven.'

'So whenever any kids of your own, when you have them, lose control and hit out and you happen to be in the way, you'll throw your arms round them and cuddle them?'

'Marriage doesn't figure in my list of objectives in life.'

Lex Moran sat forward, giving the impression of deep interest. 'Really? So what do you intend to do, live with a man? Because if so,' he raked in his jacket pocket, 'let me give you my card. My bank would supply any references you might require. Relatives and friends would confirm that I'm unmarried, unattached—but not, alas, fancy free.'

For some reason which Katrine could not understand, her heart sank. So he wasn't heartwhole? Who was the woman—Lara Holland, the pharmacist?

He stood, thrust hands into pockets and strolled across to look down at her. To find his eyes she had to bend her head back uncomfortably far, passing over those hard-boned hips, belted waist, broad shoulders, the whole solid frame of him. By the time she found her objective, her pulses were racing.

'Not fancy free, because--' he bent over her suddenly supporting himself with his hands on the arms of her chair, 'you see, I fancy you, Miss Hume, bluntness, rudeness, high spirits, fireworks and all. So take my card and any

time, day or night, you want a man's company, just call that number and I'll be there.'

He held out the card, his grey eyes glinting, but she averted her head in a gesture of rejection. In an instant, he found the neck of her dress, widened its opening and pushed the card down. When she felt the brush of his fingers on the yielding softness of her skin, she clasped her hands round his wrist and jerked his arm away.

He straightened as if nothing had happened and watched with amusement while she reached with shaking fingers for the card, which she then tore into small pieces. These she scattered over the carpet. The fury in her eyes only deepened his amusement.

He reached for his glass, downed his drink and said, 'Now that we know exactly where we stand in relation to each other, what do you want to do? Go home, or return to the school?'

It was as though nothing had happened, as though they had been conducting an ordinary, everyday conversation. If he ever made love to a woman—and Katrine was aware that he must have done so many times—when it was over, did he treat it as lightly, dismiss it all as easily as he had that incident between them ?

'Go back to the school, please,' she answered, annoyed that her voice wavered a little.

'That beloved school of yours. Despite your demonstrations and your meetings, you know in your heart what its fate must be, don't you?'

'No, I don't,' she cried. 'We won't give in! How can I make you understand? But I never will, will I? You're so far removed,' she looked around, 'from ordinary, simple-hearted people--'

'Thanks for that,' he said dryly. 'Which is presumably why those "ordinary, simple-hearted" people respected my judgment enough to vote for me in the local elections to become their representative on the county council.'

He was right, of course, and she apologised reluctantly. 'But don't you see,' she persisted earnestly, the long, red-gold hair following the line of her rounded cheeks, her clear brow pleated in her effort to convince him, 'that the village school, *any* village school, is not just a school? To the villagers, it's the centre of the community. If you take away the school, to them it would be like taking away their children.'

He stood, moving his hands impatiently within his pockets. She had not yet succeeded in convincing him, so she tried again.

'People won't come and live here, Mr Moran. That's what they're afraid of, don't you see? It will turn into a "ghost" village. When the children grow into young people, because they didn't go to school here, they'll feel no loyalty to the place, they'll feel they don't belong. They'll go away into the towns and only the old will be left.'

He sighed. 'Villages don't die, Miss Hume. They exist and will go on doing so as they have in the past.'

'Not without a centre they won't, not without a school, not without somewhere where mothers can take their children every day and feel they're nearby and safe and being looked after by people they know and trust.'

He was shaking his head and she grew desperate. 'Don't you know,' she stood in her anxiety to make contact with his understanding, 'don't you know that the death warrant has virtually been signed for this village?'

His raised eyebrows revealed his amused disbelief.

'And,' she persisted, 'I'll tell you how, and who did it. Your wonderful local authority. They've turned down planning permission for ten new houses which a local builder was hoping to put up to the north of the village. They know, Mr Moran, those planners know what they're doing. They're making quite sure that no other families with children will move in, because that would mean the school must be kept going.'

'You talk of "them", the local authority, as if they had Machiavellian intentions!'

'Why don't you say "we", Mr Moran!' she accused. 'You're one of them.'

He inclined his head mockingly. 'Even if *we* close the village school, the children won't be deprived of their schooling. They will be taken by bus to the next village, where numbers are also dwindling, thus helping to boost those and prevent the closure of that particular school.'

'Children aren't pawns in a great game of chess, Mr Moran,' she said, her heart thudding. 'If you were a parent, if you had a wife--'

His eyes narrowed. 'You're becoming dangerously personal.'

'I'm sorry if I am. All the same, I repeat—if you had a wife and you saw the anxiety in her eyes every time she waved your—and her—children off on a school bus to the next village, or the next town, you'd be on our side, fighting with us, for us, not against us.'

'You're taking an awful lot for granted,' he replied crisply. 'Have you been told officially that the school is closing?'

Her anger subsided, leaving her limp. 'Rumours, that's all. You've been away, haven't you? They've all been waiting for you to come back before the final decision is taken.'

Her hands were bunched in her jacket pocket, the toe of her shoe made circles on the light brown carpet. She could not bring herself to look at him. She had said so much. There had been no one there—like Rob or her grandfather—to caution her. She had probably said too much and lost the battle for them all.

When he spoke at last, his voice was soft. 'You'll have to humour me, Miss Hume, won't you?' A finger lifted her chin. If her torrent of words were not still hanging about the room, she would have jerked away, but she dared not worsen her case. Their eyes met, his questioning, unreadable, hers uncertain now, but still bearing traces of the fire that had made them blaze with persuasiveness and a desperate sincerity.

'You'll have to take pity on me some evenings, won't you, and accept my invitations to dine.'

Gently she removed her chin from his caressing fingers. 'No, Mr Moran. I'm sorry, but that's not my way.'

'Did you really think I thought it was?'

Katrine looked up at the odd note in his voice. She lifted her shoulders. 'I—I didn't know what to think. I've never--' she looked around, 'I've never had dealings with a man in your position before.' She smiled at the carpet. 'I guess I just don't know what makes men like you tick!'

His laughter was loud. 'The best watches don't tick any more. They're almost silent and full of batteries and electronic wizardry, all kinds of things beyond the comprehension of untried young teachers.'

'Are you implying that you're beyond my comprehension?'

'Totally and completely,' he mocked. 'We live and breathe in different worlds.' He was laughing at her and because she did not know what he was talking about she grew irritated.

'Would you please take me back to the school? It's lunchtime and my sandwiches are in the staff room.' She looked at him challengingly. 'How long is it since you had a sandwich lunch, Mr Moran?'

'More years than I care to remember.'

'So you see what I meant,' she returned triumphantly, 'when I said how far removed you are from ordinary, simple-minded people!'

His smile hardened. 'Bluntness, your grandfather called it? Frankness? You don't mince your words? I'd call it audacity and impertinence. In other words, sheer, unadulterated cheek!'

She had got on the wrong side of him again. 'I'm sorry,' she said, her manner subdued. 'Will you *please* take me back to the school?'

'As fast as my car can carry you there,' he replied tautly, and kept his word.

Only a few minutes later, Katrine was walking across the school playground, and his car was a white speck in the distance.

When Katrine told her grandfather that Lex Moran had taken her to his house to recover from Andy Brown's onslaught, Thomas Hume looked at her with suspicion.

'Why his house?' he asked, reaching for his slippers which were in their special corner near the fireplace. 'Trying to get you on his side about closing the school?'

'Grandfather,' Katrine said, laughing, 'you should know me better than that! I'm afraid,' she paused guiltily, watching him remove his jacket and settle back in his favourite armchair, 'I upset him a bit by the things I said. He told me at the end he thought I was...' she stopped to take a breath, 'cheeky.'

Thomas let out a loud laugh. 'Good for you, girl! Got the Hume spirit, you have. Don't let anyone knock it out of you.'

Katrine spread the cloth on the table. 'What *is* Mr Moran, Grandfather? I mean, what's his work?'

'Well,' Thomas rubbed his chin, 'he's what they call an industrial tycoon or something. He owns a lot of factories all over the country—one or two abroad, as well, I'm told. They make engineering parts that no one else makes. Very specialised, some of them, made to the customer's exact requirements—you know, like a man's made-to-measure suit. None of your mass production. He's done well out of it, too. He's got plenty of money, he's good-looking, got no ties--' he looked smilingly at his granddaughter. 'Come to think of it, he'd make some woman a good catch. Took you to his house did he?'

He was teasing, Katrine knew. All the same, she exclaimed indignantly, 'Grandfather! He only took pity on me.'

'Yes, yes,' he sighed. 'You've only got to look around and see how we live, you and me, and the way he lives with his big house and fat bank balance, to realise how different our ways are from his.'

Katrine sighed, then shrugged and went to the kitchen to prepare the evening meal.

Next morning as Katrine tidied the house before leaving for school, the telephone rang. 'For Grandfather,' she thought, but she was wrong.

'Miss Hume?' As she recognised the voice, her pulse rate speeded up.

'Yes, Mr Moran?' If she thought her brisk tone would take the mockery from his voice, she was wrong. There was no mockery there, only a businesslike crispness which conveyed to her the fact that her name was merely one on a list to whom routine calls should be made.

'How are your injuries?'

'Well, the bruises are browner, the bumps a little bumpier, the abrasions still sore, but I'm feeling fine, thank you.'

The silence that followed made her wonder whether he regarded her words as impudent, amusing—or a straightforward and factual medical report. She was not, it seemed, to be enlightened as to his reaction. 'Will you be going to work?' he questioned tersely. A quick breath was essential while she put her temper on a tight rein.

'Yes, Mr Moran,' she answered at last. 'What is this call about, Mr Moran? An efficiency check? An exploration of my competence as a teacher with particular regard to my ability to withstand the effects of the destructive side of the children in my care?'

The crash of the caller's receiver was her only answer. So once again she had earned the disapproval of the man with all the power. Well, she thought resignedly, she would just have to get used to his displeasure. If the villagers were going to fight the battle to the finish—and this they were determined to

do— there would be many more occasions when she would be forced to speak her mind to the man called Lex Moran.

But hadn't he, an irritating inner voice chided, been thoughtful enough to call and ask how she was? Only to make sure, her spirited voice answered, that she was not intending to take the day off just to recover from a few superficial bruises. All the same, the first voice insisted, there had been no need to be rude.

To cover her irritation at the small skirmish going on inside her, Katrine hurried out of the house as fast as her injured legs would carry her, arriving at the bus stop too early.

A sleek white car nosed its way along the narrow country road. Recognising it, Katrine turned her back. She pretended to, be enraptured by the fields of fast-growing corn, the hedges covered in summer green. 'If I hold my breath,' she thought, 'and count ten as I did when I was a child, he'll go away, I know he will!'

'Stop behaving like one of your young charges and get in,' a curt voice told her.

She swung round. 'Public transport's good enough for someone in my low level of society, thank you,' she snapped.

'Impudence,' Lex Moran said through his teeth, 'will get you nowhere. I said get in and I meant it.'

She stayed where she was.

'Look,' he persisted, 'I don't usually force my company or my car on to any unwilling female. On this occasion, however, I'm thinking of your damaged legs and the number of hours you'll be forced to stand on them today. And—I'll say it for you because I can see that nasty curl spoiling your otherwise tempting lips—• I want to make sure that fifty per cent of the staff at the village school doesn't absent herself unnecessarily from her duties. Now, are you going to get in or do I have to come round there and use force?'

Her eyes scanned the road. There was no sign of the bus. She cursed herself for being so early. The door was opened for her and she slid into the front passenger seat. 'Thank you,' she said stiffly.

'No trouble at all,' he responded with a mocking smile.

He made no move to drive on and she looked at him enquiringly. With a sigh, as if exasperated by her stupidity, he reached across her for the safety belt. As he extended it diagonally over her body, his hand brushed against her breast. Had the action been accidental or deliberate? Her cheeks reddened and she looked at him, only to find that the mockery had extended from his lips to his eyes.

'Next time you'll do it yourself, won't you?' he said, a smile flitting across his full, cynical mouth.

So it had not been accidental, that bitter-sweet brush of his hand against her. She had to retaliate, and it could only be with words.

'We shall win, you know,' she said, as he drove on.

A swift lift of the thick eyebrows, a quick glance round and he said, with mock innocence, 'Win what?'

'You know very well what I mean. Our fight against the authorities. Against *you*.'

'I suppose,' long-sufferingly, 'you're referring to the school.' A rise and fall of the elegantly suited shoulder, then, 'All right, so you think you'll win. Who am I to deflect you from your chosen—or should I say ill- chosen path?'

There was a hostile silence, then he said, 'You'll need money if you're going to conduct a campaign. Where do you think you'll get that from? The villagers,, the parents of the children concerned, are not exactly overflowing with the stuff.'

'We've thought about that. We shall hold collections, jumble sales, dances. There's a dance this weekend in the village hall in aid of the fund.'

'What fund?'

'The "Save Our School" fund, of course.'

He seemed amused. 'How much have you amassed to date, I wonder? Enough, no doubt, to build a private school if the state-owned school should be closed.'

They had arrived at the school and the children, walking in groups through the gates, stared with undisguised interest at the long white car.

His sarcasm stung and Katrine had to make a parting shot. 'I don't believe in private schools.'

'What's wrong with them?'

'They cater for the elite,' she flung open the door. And there's no elite in this village.' She paused in the act of getting out, turning to look at him. 'Except you.'

He burst out laughing, and his laughter followed her until she disappeared, limping painfully fast, into the school building.

It was during the morning break that Rob broke the news. They were waiting for their steaming coffee to cool when he said,

'War's been declared. I've had a telephone message from the County Education Department asking me to send them details of the numbers on our register, where the children live and so on.' He found a piece of paper on which he had made notes. 'They also want to know the age of the school, its condition, the repairs which, in my expert opinion, are needed to bring it up to the required standard, comparable with the more modern schools in other parts of the county.'

'So this is it, Rob?' said Katrine.

'This is certainly it.' He threw the paper down. 'Somebody there means business.'

'Need we try and guess who it is?' Katrine asked, her throat tight. 'He—he phoned me this morning, Rob.'

Mr Moran, I mean, of course. To ask how my bruises were. He also gave me a lift in his car—against my will. Because of my injuries, he said.'

'Well,' Rob smiled ruefully, 'at least that shows the man's human.'

'I—I was rude to him.'

Rob groaned. 'Not again!'

She nodded. 'Which probably explains this.' She motioned to the scribbled notes.

'Who knows? But you're not exactly improving our chances of winning by being rude to the man with--'

'All the power,' she interrupted, 'and, as he so delicately put it, "the whip hand". All right, I know I could be making things more difficult for us—my conscience has already told me that. I'm sorry, Rob, but I feel so strongly about this, I—well, I just couldn't help it.'

They drank their coffee in silence, then Katrine looked at the large old ticking clock on the wall. Break-time was nearly over. 'You'll give them the information they want?'

'I must. And what's more, it's got to be strictly accurate. They only need to come here and count heads—twenty-eight with no absentees—to check my accuracy.'

'And,' Katrine took him up, 'they've only got to come and look round the village to see the empty cottages, let alone the piles of bricks waiting for the new houses the planning committee refused the builder permission to build.'

There was a short silence.

'At least there's nothing wrong with the building,' Katrine went on defiantly. 'It's as sound and waterproof as it was when it was built over a hundred years ago.'

'True,' sighed Rob, 'but when you've said "one hundred years old", you've said it all, haven't you?'

'You're not trying to say ours is a hopeless case?'

Rob looked up at her as she stood, ready to leave. 'I'm trying not to.'

'Look, Rob, we're fighting to our last breath. We're not only fighting for the school, our jobs are involved, too, you know that. We mustn't give in, not now. This is just the beginning!'

CHAPTER FOUR

THEY had done their best to brighten the darkened yellow walls of the village hall. The evening sun streamed in through the high windows, slanting like spotlights on the heads of the dancers.

To Katrine's delight, every few moments another couple entered. Parents of the children had brought friends and relatives, many of whom were buying tickets at the door. The price of entry was moderate, because, as Lex Moran had said with irritating accuracy, most of the villagers, even the young married couples, did not have a great deal of money.

A local group, consisting of three teenage brothers and one sister, of pupils at the village school, provided the music. The old piano needed re-tuning, the electric guitar-player needed to practise more. The drums boomed a little too loudly, but the girl singer was pleasant to hear.

Since they were giving their services free, Katrine could not find it in herself to criticise. The dancers had come to dance to whatever music set their reflexes itching to move to the modern rhythms and familiar songs.

At Rob's insistence, Katrine circled round the crowded floor with him. 'I seem,' he murmured, burying his face in her hair, 'to have been running around half the evening in your fleeting footsteps!'

* Katrine laughed. 'I'm one of the organisers, Rob. I've had to do my duty and see that everyone's happy. After all, it's in a good cause.'

'So is my pursuit of you.'

Katrine frowned, resting her forehead against his shoulder. 'I wish you wouldn't. I like you, you know that, but marriage—well, it just doesn't figure in the story of my life!' She smiled engagingly at him and let her gaze wander. 'That table's almost giving under the weight of all those bottles!'

Rob accepted the subject change with a resigned shrug. 'It was your idea to make it a "Bring your own drink" dance.'

'And everyone has, from the look of it.' Katrine glanced round the hall—and found her gaze trapped by the man who, at that moment, was buying himself a ticket at the door. Katrine caught her breath. 'Except one—Mastermind himself.'

'Not--' Rob strained round. 'Not Mr Moran?'

'No less.'

'You'd better take that scowl off your face,' Rob advised, 'or you'll drive the man away.'

'Which could turn him against us,' Katrine jerked her eyes from their silent battle with the steely grey ones, and stared unseeingly ahead, 'as a result of which he'll not only sabotage our efforts to save the school, but go and demolish the building with his own hands.'

'Maybe if we were a bit more friendly towards him, he would change his mind.' Rob held her away from him. 'Smile into his eyes with your own special smile, and he might even dip his hand into his own bank account and give you personally a fistful of money for our cause.'

In spite of the distaste she felt at Rob's suggestion, even if he had not meant it seriously, she laughed. Then she sobered. 'If you're asking me to grovel to the man and beg for a few crumbs from his financial table--'

Rob's hurried 'sh-sh!' came too late.

'I -take it that I'm the "man" you're talking about, Miss Hume?'

Katrine had been dancing with Rob at the edge of the crowd, near to the line of spectators, one of whom was Lex Moran, which meant she had done it again! She had lashed out, within his hearing, at the man in whose hands their destiny lay.

Rob slowed to a standstill, going pink as if he himself had spoken unguardedly. 'She didn't mean it seriously, Mr Moran. She never does, do you, Katrine?'

So Rob had seen fit to cover her gaffe by doing the grovelling, had he? His eyes pleaded, it's all in a good cause. But she refused to sink her pride, as he was asking her to do. Nor would she lie.

'You should know me better than that, Rob. Whatever I say, I always mean seriously, especially when so much is at stake.'

Rob suppressed a sigh and lifted his hand in a gesture which said, What can you do with the girl?

It seemed that Lex Moran needed no second invitation to try his hand at taming the rebel. 'Thanks,' he said to Rob, and swung the astonished subject of their wordless conversation into his arms.

'So your boy-friend wants you brought to heel, does he?' asked her partner with an anticipatory glint. 'He couldn't have passed you over to a better or more experienced person.'

Katrine jerked in his hold in a vain attempt to free herself. 'I've no doubt that many women have passed through your arms on their way to your own private harem, Mr Moran, but you won't find me among them!'

He held her still with ease. 'Don't underestimate my ability to subjugate a woman to my wishes, Miss Hume,' he said softly. 'But let me correct you--' he guided her away from a collision with another dancing couple, 'I have no harem. Far too expensive, even for a man of my means. By the way,' he deflected her retort, 'how are your legs?'

'Well enough to carry me round tonight with all the men who ask me to dance, thank you.'

Like Rob he held her away and looked into her face. 'So you set no limit on the number of males on whom you're prepared to bestow your favours?'

'You're reading an immoral meaning into an innocent remark, deliberately, I suspect.'

'There's no curbing your tongue, is there?'

'I'm blunt. My grandfather told you.'

'Sometimes bluntness can be counter-productive. You'll learn that as you get older.' His face found her hair as Rob's had done. While she had tolerated Rob's action—had scarcely even noticed it—such a caress, light though it was, from this man gave rise within her to a violent and angry reaction. Her head moved sharply away and she gazed, fiery-eyed, into his face.

He smiled. They moved on and the incident was over, but it left behind an alarming ripple on the hitherto undisturbed pool of Katrine's emotions.

He said, looking down into the vital, defiant features upturned towards him, 'Don't you ever believe in negotiating with the opposition, in holding friendly discussions, with the emphasis on "friendly"?''

'You mean doing questionable deals with the enemy behind the backs of one's own allies?'

He jerked her against him and his arms around her tightened, not in warmth but in anger. 'You're quite a girl, aren't you? No compromise. You throw reason and tact out of the window. I'm the man with the necessary power to sway all the people concerned one way or the other, for or against the retention or the closure of your precious school, yet you address me as if I were the devil himself.'

His hands went to her waist as they danced and the pressure of the palms and the feel of his legs as they touched hers fleetingly made her heartbeats erratic. 'Doesn't that desirable body of yours possess even a particle of common sense?'

'Not where you're concerned.' His sharp exhalation of breath fanned her brow and she asked herself, Now why am I still being so rude? Why can't I follow Rob's example and at least make the effort to be pleasant?

The music stopped and it was almost with a gesture of relief that Lex released her. As he motioned towards Rob, his eyes were cool. He led her across the room, thanked her for her company and walked away.

'Been at it again, Katrine?' Rob groaned. 'Couldn't you just *try--*'

'Don't you start!' she cried. She then astonished herself by bursting into tears and racing headlong for the ladies' room.

On the way, and in her tear-blinded state, she found herself in punishing contact with a man who seemed to have planted himself in her path. His hands gripped her arms and she knew who it was.

'What's wrong, Katrine?' Lex Moran had used her first name and not a portion of her body or mind objected! 'Feeling ill?'

'N-no—y-yes,' she stammered, holding a handkerchief to her face. 'Please let me pass.'

'Are your bruises giving trouble? Have you been on your feet too much?'

'Yes—no, I haven't, I'm going home.' She twisted away and ran into the cloakroom. The mirror showed her a tear-streaked face and she found a tissue and rubbed at her cheeks.

Since some of the parents might see her slipping out and catch her before she could escape, she made an attempt to compose herself.

She had taken no more than a few paces into the small entrance lobby, when a tall broad-shouldered man blocked her way. Not Lex Moran again! she thought. He was the last person whose company she wanted. Swiftly she side-stepped and called, 'Rob, please take me home.'

A hand grasping her shoulder impelled her towards the door. 'I've had a word with Rob Bowes. He's agreed to take the dance over from you, while I take you over from him. Which means that I'll be the one to take you home. And *no arguments!*'

Subdued by events and emotional exhaustion, Katrine did not resist. When Lex said, as she sat beside him in the passenger seat of his car, 'Direct me to your house,' she did so.

He pulled the car to the kerb and switched off the ignition.

'Thank you for the lift,' she said quickly, hoping he would take the hint and leave.

'Is your grandfather in?' he enquired.

Katrine shook her head. 'He's gone to the local senior citizens' club. Please,' her eyes lifted to his, 'how do I open this door?'

He smiled as if he knew of her wish to get away before the need arose to display her good manners by inviting him in. 'I'll show you,' he said and got out.

She eased herself from the car. His hand cupping her elbow assisted her and she forced herself to reveal no agitation at his touch.

'Thank you,' she said again, and smiled into his eyes as Rob had suggested. That, plus the gratitude, she thought desperately, should surely tell him he was free to go. To her dismay, he showed no signs of departing. 'I'll manage now,' she added, a note of desperation creeping in.

He smiled and his expression seemed so sincere, she suspected it. 'No trouble,' he said, locking the car and waiting at her side. 'Just lead the way, Miss Hume.'

So we're back to formality, she thought, with a dip of her heart. Not only that, he seemed to have every intention of escorting her to the front door.

With fumbling fingers, she found the key in the depths of her handbag. While she inserted it in the lock and opened the door, Lex Moran watched. Surely he'll go now, she thought. But he followed her in, stepping confidently over the threshold.

What was she to do with the man? And it was because of him that she had run away from the dance, yet here he was in her grandfather's home!

How it had happened she could not, in her dazed state, work out. She remembered his home, its spaciousness and elegance. Against the surroundings to which he was accustomed, this house must seem next door to a slum dwelling.

A kind of panic entered her. 'I'm sorry about the way we live. I'm sorry the place is so dowdy, the furniture so old, the--'

'For heaven's sake,' he said irritably, 'never apologise for your home. Have pride in it, never make comparisons. It's how happy you are that matters, isn't it? Be honest, as you usually are, and admit it. If you love a place, if it reflects the sides of your personality you #'ant it to reflect, then boast about it. Don't tell the world, "I'm sorry."'

This side of the man nonplussed her. She had expected a look of superciliousness, contempt and even pity, not this compassion and understanding.

'Why the frown?' he asked cynically. 'Surprised because I've displayed a touch of humanity? Yes, I see you are. From the moment you saw me at the back of the hall after you had addressed that meeting, you've branded me as grasping and ruthless. Now you've discovered I'm not as black as you painted me, you're embarrassed to the tip of your toes, aren't you?' His smile was mocking and tinged with malice. 'And annoyed because your judgment has been proved wrong.'

Has it? Katrine was about to ask, but bit the words back. He was a guest. Anyway, she did not want always to be quarrelling with him. He had shown her he had an understanding side to his character. Why should she not try to make contact with that part of him? Why, she surprised herself by asking, should she not try to make him like her a little? Why not do as Rob had suggested and be more friendly towards him? He might, Rob had said, change his mind ...

'I can't offer you a drink, Mr Moran. My grandfather doesn't keep much alcohol in the house. But--'

'Coffee?'

She nodded.

'Where's the kitchen?'

She pointed. His hands found her shoulders. They turned her and impelled her towards it. 'Off you go, then. Oh, and--' Katrine turned at the living-room door. 'I like it dark, with the minimum of milk. And sweet,' his voice lowered caressingly, 'like a woman's kiss.'

'I'll put so much sugar in it,' she retorted, 'the spoon will stand up!'

'You do, my little schoolmarm, and I'll put you over my knee and give you the spanking of your life!'

As the colour swept up to her hairline—the colour of anger—he laughed in her face. Then he turned his back, thrust his hands into his pockets and wandered round the room, examining in closest detail every family photograph on display.

By the time Katrine returned from the kitchen carrying a tray bearing two cups and saucers from her grandfather's best tea service, Lex was stretched out, completely at home, in her grandfather's favourite armchair.

It seemed he was quite untouched by the enormous difference in their living styles. He had, it seemed, been able to adapt, chameleon-like, to the homely, if shabby, environment in which Katrine passed her life outside the four even drabber walls of the village school.

As Katrine entered, Lex pulled himself from the armchair. His politeness, after her own almost perpetual rudeness to him, dismayed her.

His keen eyes scanned the tray as she set it on a low table. 'Grandfather's long-treasured best cups and saucers?' he inquired, eyebrow lifted with amusement. 'I thought I was going to be treated to a pottery mug brimfull of ferociously hot liquid.'

She looked up at him uncertainly. 'That's what we usually have, but I thought you—well, might not like——'

'So now I'm a snob, in addition to everything else?' His laughing eyes took the sting from the words.

Katrine lifted her shoulders, not knowing how to answer. She poured coffee from the bone china pot and handed him a cup. 'Please help yourself to sugar,' she invited.

He laughed, reaching forward from his chair to spoon in a heap of white crystals. 'Playing safe, are you? So you haven't carried out your threat of filling the cup with sugar. Pity. No spanking, either.'

'You wouldn't have dared,' she said, concentrating on her coffee.

'Is that a challenge?' The hardness in his voice brought her eyes up to his. 'I warn you, challenge always incites me to action.'

He had forced her into a corner. She could only shake her head and hope that a display of bewilderment would placate him. There was silence for a while as they drank.

Lex refused her offer of another cup and settled back in the armchair. 'Tell me, does Thomas, your grandfather, support you in your campaign?'

'Of course. All the villagers do.'

'Except one?' he queried, smiling. Katrine frowned. 'Myself?'

'You? How could *you* support us? You're chairman of the committee that intends to liquidate us, and as such, must necessarily support them. Anyway,' her eyes challenged, 'you aren't a villager.'

He frowned now. 'How's that? I live in this village, which makes me a villager.'

She could not let that pass. 'How can you have the audacity,' she choked, 'to call yourself a member of the village community? You're isolated from the rest of us by your great house, your priceless possessions, your immense wealth.'

Her words seemed to anger him. 'I've earned all my possessions, Miss Hume,' again his formality made her wince, 'by the sweat of my brow—or rather, exploiting the powers of my own brain. I own factories both here and abroad, but they didn't grow of their own accord. It took hard work, expertise, technical knowledge aridsheer determination to form my own company and nourish it until it became the size it now is. So why shouldn't I indulge my taste for privacy when I want it? Beauty,' his voice softened as his eyes wandered over her shapeliness, 'when I want it?'

'You--' she swallowed. She *had* to fight back!

'You own a Rolls-Royce. There's no need for that. It's only a means of imprinting in the minds of anyone who's interested your exact status in life, of telling the world--'

'Why shouldn't I buy the best?' he cut in. 'I can afford it. Anyway, in the times you've condescended to ride in my car, you haven't exactly repudiated its luxury, for all your slightly self-righteous approach to those whose hard work has brought them rewards; and in spite of your rather pompous attitude to people like myself who are able to live as they please.'

Incensed .by his implied criticism of her principles, she cried, 'I live as I please, too. All I have is what I've earned by the sweat of *my* brow—or rather, brains.'

'Which makes us equal,' he interposed with a quick, malicious smile.

'No, it does not!' she retorted. 'But I'm not grumbling. I'm happy as I am. Too much money corrupts '

'Does it, indeed? So I'm corrupted now!'

Katrine flushed as yet another accusation was added to the list of personality defects she had attributed to him. 'Only you can know that,' she answered. 'All the same, I couldn't live the way you live.'

'Nobody's asking you to, Miss Hume,' he said, his eyes hooded and sardonic.

' Her flush deepened. He had chosen to take her remark as a proposal—but of which kind she would not allow herself to guess.

His head rested against the chair back, his long legs were extended and crossed at the ankles. His arms stretched along those of the chair and his long-fingered hands tapped out a silent but oddly meaningful rhythm. If the movements were a reflection of the thoughts going through his head, then those thoughts were primitive indeed.

At the precise moment at which Katrine felt that she could no longer stand his relentless scrutiny, he rose, wandered to the sideboard and stretched a finger towards a transistor radio which stood on it. 'May I?' he asked, and pressed the 'on' button.

Music drifted into the room, melodious and sweet, touching deeply the emotions which only at moments of intense feeling would, without such stimulus, be stirred.

Lex could not have been immune to its effect, as Katrine had surmised, because he strolled to stand in front of her, hands in pockets, legs a little apart. On his face was a smiling look which, when Katrine encountered it, had the blood racing through her veins. It's anger, she told herself desperately, but when his hand came out and caught her wrist and pulled her up to face him, she knew she had lied to herself.

'Katrine,' he murmured, his eyes dwelling on her lips, 'I have a compulsive urge to test the taste of the mouth through which so many insulting words are flung at me. Is it, I wonder,' he released her wrist, 'sour, bitter and repelling or,' his arms slipped round her, pulling her slowly, inevitably, towards him, 'sweet, delicious and exquisitely satisfying?'

'Please--' she began, but his mouth came down and her protesting words stayed where they were.

The pressure of her mouth against his was plainly not enough for him. He pulled her hard against the length of him and she felt the strength of the muscles in his upper arms as she clung to them, the imprint of his hips on

hers. There was an unlocking of clamouring desires within her and it was his demanding, searching mouth that had turned the master key.

His hand moved down her back, moulding her still more closely to him. Slowly, meltingly, resistance ebbed. She forgot the persistent animosity between them, she forgot about the barriers she had placed between herself and all men, she even forgot that he was the enemy. Every coherent thought was swamped by the longing that those moments of warmth and intimacy between them might continue, intensify until...

Taking his time, Lex ended the kiss and eased her away from him. His eyes moved over her flushed face, noting the bright eyes, a little widened as if in surprise at her body's unresisting surrender. He saw the wide mouth whose lips were slightly parted as if waiting, waiting for more.

He lifted a hand and pushed the long, red-gold hair from her rounded cheeks. Her heart thumped, her ears were weary of waiting for endearments which she was certain hovered on his lips, putting behind them all their past animosity.

'For a girl who claims that marriage is not on her life's agenda,' he said, 'you're willing to give away a hell of a lot of yourself. All free, too. Or does the demand for payment come later?'

It was like falling downstairs in the dark. Her hand lifted, swung—and was caught in a bruising grip. Her eyes blazed into his and saw reflected back a glittering hardness. Yes, he was hard, no doubt about it, and there was no doubt, either, that he was not one whit moved by her spontaneous fury at his insinuation.

'Go on, say it,' she spat out, ' "You're a good actress, Miss Hume!". I can see the words hovering on your lips.'

'How *have* you grown so clever at guessing my thoughts?' he drawled.

She wrenched away and stood facing him, her breathing heavy, her breasts rising and falling with the effort. How could she get him to leave before her tongue and her impetuosity wrought even more damage?

'Thank you for bringing me home, Mr Moran. Although I would far rather Rob had brought me.'

He did not reply in words, but the calculated contempt in his face as he eyed her before walking to the door produced an icy coldness in her heart.

Next day, Katrine was subdued, but Rob Bowes, although glancing at her curiously now and then when they met in his study for coffee and tea breaks, said nothing.

He took her out that evening. He had asked her tentatively, expecting a refusal, but she had surprised him by accepting. They ate at one of the nearby town's better hotels. It was during the meal that Rob must have felt that unless he broke through Katrine's barrier of silence, their evening together would be a complete failure.

'What's wrong?' he asked, placing his hand over her lifeless one as it lay on the table.

How could she tell him, I'm worried about so many things—about how discourteous I've been to the man who holds in his hands like a puppet-master our livelihoods and the future schooling of the village children. About how I've hurled insults at the man elected by the people of the area to represent them on the county council. But most of all, I'm worried about the way I keep remembering how Lex Moran kissed me and how I responded to him, and how I didn't want him to stop ...

She looked at Rob's hand over hers and sighed. 'I'm making a mess of things, Rob. It's my stupid tongue running away with me. If we lose the battle, it will be my fault.' Her brows pleaded. 'How can I learn some tact?'

'I suppose you're referring to your quarrels with Lex Moran?' Katrine nodded miserably. 'Well, that's perfectly understandable. You feel he's the chief culprit, that he's the major threat to all our hopes--' He frowned, his hold on Katrine's hand tightening. 'You must have wished him here,' he muttered. 'He's just come in.'

Katrine glanced over her shoulder to the swing doors. As her eyes found Lex Moran, so his swung away from her. He must have seen Rob's reassuring clasp of her hand. No doubt it was interpreted by Lex as a loving gesture.

She said bitterly, 'Together with beautiful, clinging escort.'

'Isn't that Lara Holland, the girl who dispenses medicines at the chemist's shop?'

'None other.' Katrine turned back to Rob, picked up a coffee spoon and studied the name of the hotel which was engraved upon it. 'The clever, witty, beautiful blonde called Lara. And plainly the well-established girl-friend of the equally clever, witty and handsome Lex Moran.' She saw Rob frown uncomfortably. She supposed she was being over-blunt again—or maybe he thought she was jealous! 'They make a fine couple, don't they?' she finished bitterly.

'We do, don't we, Miss Hume?'

Katrine's eyes flashed shut and she thought, 'Oh no, not again!' Not for the first time Rob had seen him coming and had tried to warn her.

She lifted heavy eyes to the cool grey ones above her. Yes, it was clear he intended to have fun with her again, like a dog catching a biscuit in mid-air and proceeding to crunch it to pieces.

'I'm delighted you think I'm clever and witty, not to mention handsome, Miss Hume. If I hadn't heard the sarcastic tone of your voice I would have said that they were the first pleasant words I've ever heard you use about me.'

The smile which curved Lex Moran's lips was localised, not even indenting the laughter lines from nose to mouth. He turned to her companion. 'Having an enjoyable evening, Rob?'

'Fine, thanks.'

'Glad to hear it. I wouldn't offer to take your place if you offered me a fortune.' He gave a quick mocking bow towards Katrine and left them to join his languidly-smiling partner.

'Whew,' Rob murmured, looking at Katrine reproachfully, 'when you put your foot in it, you really do it properly, don't you?'

'Is it *my* fault,' she demanded, 'if Lex Moran's got a habit of creeping up on people and eavesdropping?'

'He was hardly eavesdropping. Your voice was loud enough to carry across the room.'

'I'm glad,' said Katrine, thinking of the kiss Lex had taken the evening before and then proceeded to insult her. 'I'm *glad, glad, glad!*'

Rob saw her wild eyes and guessed that tears were not far away. 'All right, all right,' he patted her hand. 'When I brought you here for the evening, I hoped we'd be able to forget our troubles for a while.' Katrine caught her lower lip hard between her teeth. 'I'm sorry, Rob, I really am.' She smiled and put her hand over his. 'I don't know how you put up with me.'

'Nor do I,' Rob said, shaking his head with an answering, if rueful, smile.

Two days later, Rob collected Katrine and her grandfather to take them to a meeting in the hall of the village school.

The hall was full and the chattering silenced into an expectant waiting when Rob, acting as Chairman, rose from his seat on the platform. After a brief introduction, he called on Katrine to make a report.

Katrine stood, a slim, challenging, appealingly young figure, and told the audience that there was, unfortunately, little progress to report. They had written numerous letters to the Education Committee who, sadly, appeared to regard the whole matter as of little interest because, in their eyes at least, Charton village school would soon cease to exist.

A woman in the audience enquired whether there was no official at all on their side.

'Not one, as far as I can see.' Katrine answered. 'As you probably know by now, the chairman of the Education Committee is back from his travels abroad. I--' she cleared her throat to steady her voice, 'I have met him and talked to him. I'm sorry to have to report that his attitude is obstructive and inflexible and A nudge from Rob Bowes seated at her side checked the flow of words.

With his head he indicated a member of the audience near the back of the hall. Even sitting down, Lex Moran looked formidable. His arms were folded, his legs crossed, his head high, his eyes, as the evening sun caught them, dark and forbidding.

'And--' Katrine faltered, breathing deeply, 'and I cannot hold out a great deal of hope in our dealings with—with the Education Committee. Our only choice is to step up our campaign.' Her eyes involuntarily sought the dark ones which had not shifted from their contemplation of her.

'We must persevere,' she said, her voice ringing out. 'We must not, under any circumstances, abandon our determination to win. We must keep our school, this school, which has served the village of Charton for so many decades.'

There was long applause as the audience responded to the animation, attractiveness and fighting words of the girl who had just addressed them.

'Any questions?' Rob asked, rising. . There were a number of questions which he and Katrine dealt with between them. Then the man at the back rose to his feet, and Katrine's heartbeats quickened as she saw how his casual clothes emphasised his breadth of shoulder, and his lean physique. The brown shirt was short-sleeved and revealed the dark hair on his folded arms. The gold watch around his wrist glinted in the beams of sunlight which slanted in through the windows.

There were whispers among the audience as they recognised the man as the person about whom Katrine had been speaking.

'I should like to ask the lady speaker,' he said, his deep voice echoing in the high-ceilinged hall, 'why she and her fellow-protesters--'

'He means you!' Katrine's voice rang out to the audience, unrelenting as both Rob and her grandfather, who sat in the front row, tried to silence her.

Lex Moran continued calmly and as if she had not spoken, '—are so keen to retain the use of this village school when there's a more modern school in the neighbouring village able to take with ease the children from Charton. And what's more,' he stopped in the act of sitting down, 'with ample and entirely up-to-date accommodation in which to teach them.'

A murmur ran round the hall, but whether it was in support of Lex Moran or disagreement with his sentiment Katrine did not wait to work out.

In an instant, she was on her feet, defiance staining her pale cheeks. 'In view of the age of the home the questioner has bought just outside the village, and of which he is so proud,' she disregarded another appeal from Rob, 'he should appreciate that because something is old, it does not necessarily mean that it should automatically be assigned to the rubbish heap.'

Rob leaned across and whispered, 'Katrine, you really must stop--'

'He should also know,' she persisted, ignoring the plea, 'that if there's a sense of happiness pervading a building—as there is in this school—that sense of happiness somehow communicates itself to those who either live in it or spend a large part of their lives in it. Successive generations of happy children have passed through this school, leaving behind their contentment and enjoyment of the years they spent here.'

Lex Moran rose at once and Rob quickly invited him to speak. Anything, he must have thought, to put a stop to the flow of words from the girl beside him.

'Could the lady speaker on the platform be persuaded to speak more objectively, abandon the sentiment and face the hard, economic facts? It's a waste of public money, ratepayers' money, to keep this school open with the small numbers of children attending it.'

'Objectively?' Katrine cried. 'No, I cannot look objectively at such a human problem as forcibly removing children daily from their own village to a neighbouring and unfamiliar one. If the questioner would look at the matter with compassion, instead of from the point of view of cold, inhuman finance...'

Lex Moran was on his feet again. 'May I put a few facts, Mr Chairman? That is,' with a mocking bow, 'if the lady speaker will permit. This school is well over one hundred years old. The classrooms are draughty and cold in winter and, because of the high-placed windows, denied the sun in summer. The staff room is little more than a cupboard. In the days in which the school was built, there were no such things as "pressure groups",' his glance swept round the hall, 'as there are today, no vociferous spokesmen to call for better working conditions for either pupils or staff.'

There was an excited buzz of conversation at his challenging words.

'May I put it to the meeting,' he looked around and his eyes came to rest on the deeply-breathing girl who was fighting so hard for her cause, 'that in spite of what Miss Hume says about feelings of happiness and contentment,' he mocked the words Katrine had used, 'where this school is concerned, its days of glory, if it ever had any, have long ago passed into oblivion.'

He resumed his seat in a dead silence. If anyone had agreed with him, they would not have dared, amidst such hostility, to have revealed that agreement by applauding.

Katrine felt her legs weaken and she dropped into her chair. To quarrel in private with Lex Moran was one thing, to quarrel in public with the chairman of the Education Committee was very definitely another. There was no doubt in her mind that she had antagonised him still further.

A woman's hand shot up and Rob invited her to speak. 'I put it to the meeting that we continue our fight,' she said.

By a showing of hands, there was unanimous agreement and Katrine's eyes danced with victory as they sought out Lex Moran's relaxed, detached figure at the rear of the hall.

A man stood and said, 'I would like to say that I come from a village some miles from here, but am giving my support to your cause. I must tell you that we fought as you are doing to save our school. We fought legally—no militancy, we were reasonable and civilised—and we lost the battle. It's plain from what has taken place here tonight that this village will have to take firmer action, even if it means breaking the rules.'

There was a burst of clapping as the man sat down. Lex Moran stood up and Katrine's pulses began to race. Now what? she thought desperately. If only he were not there! If only they could talk openly among themselves, without the presence of an intruder ...

'I feel,' said Lex Moran, 'that it's my duty to remind the people gathered here that if this "firmer action" suggested by the last speaker is taken and it does, in fact, as he puts it "break the rules", then whoever carries it out will be in danger of breaking the law and bringing upon themselves all the ill-feeling—and court proceedings—which this entails.'

Katrine, eyes blazing, was on her feet at once. 'May I ask Mr Lex Moran exactly why he saw fit to attend this meeting of villagers?'

He rose immediately. 'May I remind Miss Katrine Hume that I, too, am a villager, which is why I'm here. As a villager, it's natural that my interest should lie with those among whom I live.'

'You're lying!' Her words reverberated round the hall and there was a gasp from the audience at her audacity, but she was not deflected from her purpose. 'You're here, Mr Moran, to spy for the local authority which you represent as chairman of the Education Committee. You're here to listen to our plans and, if you can, to dissuade us from taking any action and to persuade us to accept the school closure.' She thought her heartbeats would choke her. She moistened her lips and said, 'Will you please be kind enough to leave this hall and allow us to discuss our plans in complete freedom from prying observation.'

'Katrine,' Rob hissed, 'you're going too far!'

From the front row came her grandfather's anxious voice. 'Don't alienate the man, Katrine. No good can come of all this.'

But some demon seemed to have taken hold, filling her with a driving urge to rid the hall—and herself— of that maddening, tormenting presence.

Of their own accord her feet took her down the short flight of steps at the side of the platform. Moments later she was facing Lex Moran as he stood at the end of the back row. 'Will you please leave this hall?' she repeated, her tone imperious. 'We have no stewards, otherwise I'd have them remove you.'

His lips drew back, revealing clenched, white teeth. 'I have my rights as a citizen, Miss Hume, and one of those is to attend a public meeting in this village.'

Of this Katrine was well aware, but her desire to hit out at him and hit hard consumed her, burning up her common sense beyond recognition.

'I have my rights too, as one of the organisers of this campaign, Mr Moran, and one of those rights is to ask anyone to whom I--' she corrected herself quickly, 'we object to leave. I ask you to leave.'

'Let him be, Katrine,' Thomas called, quiveringly.

Her hands came up against the solid, unyielding jvall of Lex Moran's chest. They began to push and she backed them up with all her strength. He did not give an inch. 'Go,' she choked, 'go, go!'

Her wrists were encased in iron grips. They were flung from him and in their descent to her sides they hit the backs of the row of chairs. A sharp cry escaped her, but she would not allow the tears to surface.

Around his mouth the blood had receded, leaving an area of white. His eyes were hard and glittering like smashed glass in sunlight. His breath came low and deep.

'You'll pay for this, my lady,' he said furiously but so softly that only she could hear. Then he turned and strode from the hall.

CHAPTER FIVE

KATRINE sank on to a seat, her fingers clenched and pressed over her eyes. She had made a social and tactical error so enormous that she would have to resign.

People gathered round her, tutting sympathetically. 'He asked for it,' someone said. 'Would have done the same myself,' another commented.

Rob pushed through and sat beside her. 'Feeling all right, Katrine?' he asked.

'A bit shaken,' she mumbled. My world's been rocked to its foundations, she should have said. I've just evicted, quite improperly, a man who, I now realise, means more to me than any other human being.

'Cup of tea, dear?' It was her grandfather's voice. She nodded.

'I'll make it,' said Rob. 'There's a kettle in the staff room. Only two cups, though. Sorry, the rest of you.' There were murmurs of 'Not to worry. We'll wait until we get home.'

'Carry on with the meeting. We'll be back soon. Come on Katrine.'

In the staff room, Rob busied himself with making tea. He did not speak, but this did not surprise Katrine. She could guess what he was feeling.

As she sipped the hot tea, she said, 'I'm sorry, Rob.' He shrugged, sitting opposite her and drinking from a chipped cup. She went on, 'I'll resign from the secretaryship of the campaign committee. After what I've done today, I've no alternative.'

'Don't be silly.'

'Rob,' she put down her empty cup, 'will you please go into the hall and tell them of my decision. I won't return. Get them to elect someone else.'

He sighed. 'If that's what you want.' He put down his cup and left her. For a few moments there was silence, then she heard his voice raised and

addressing the audience. Katrine thought idly, 'He's a good head teacher. He's got a future—if he's allowed to have one. Thanks to me,' she clenched her hands, 'he's probably just lost his job.'

Rob returned. 'They say they're unwilling to accept your resignation. They said unanimously that they've got complete confidence in you.'

Katrine pushed back her hair and stood up. 'That was kind of them. I haven't got any in myself!'

The meeting continued and Katrine asked from the platform for suggestions for future action.

'We could occupy the school,' a young mother suggested.

Rob shook his head. 'That way we would effectively be closing the school ourselves. The chairman of the Education Committee and his fellow councillors would no doubt be delighted.'

'They probably wouldn't even bother to evict us,' someone remarked, and there was laughter.

'I've thought of something,' said Katrine, rising. 'Charton House—we could occupy Charton House.'

'But that's where Mr Moran lives,' Thomas Hume answered his granddaughter. 'We can't do that!'

'Why not?' a young man asked. He must, Katrine reasoned, be the brother of one of the pupils. 'He's the one we're really fighting, isn't he? As chairman he can sway the Committee whichever way he likes. If he can persuade them to agree to the closure of the school, by convincing them that it's for the best, then our school will be closed, won't it? So what's wrong with the idea?'

'We don't know anything about his house,' protested Thomas.

'I do, Grandfather. Don't you remember—he took me there when my legs were hurt. The only thing is, how do we discover when he's out, because it would be impossible to get ourselves into the place when he's in.'

'And how do we get in,' Thomas asked, 'if the man's *out*?'

The audience laughed and Katrine answered, 'That's easy. We'll tell his housekeeper that we've come to see him on a very important local matter and are willing to await his return.'

The young man said, 'I work in the newsagent's next to the chemist's shop. Mr Moran is often in there. Lara Holland's his current girl friend. I'll ask Pat, the other girl in the shop, to listen to what they say and let me know if he lets anything out, like if he's going to a meeting or something.'

Rob then declared the meeting closed and the audience dispersed. From the centre of the hall a smiling, fair-haired, self-confident young woman emerged and made her way towards Rob and Katrine.

She extended her hand to Rob. 'I'm Ann Tulley, the new head teacher of the school they want your children to come to. I'll be delighted to help you in any way I can. Not that I don't want the children, but I think right is on your side.'

Katrine noticed at once how Rob's interest in the newcomer had brought a warmth to his eyes which she had never seen before. It showed, she thought wryly, how right she had been to persuade him that he was wasting his time hoping that she herself would one day grow fond enough of him to marry him.

She had lately been aware of how her behaviour towards Lex Moran had worried and puzzled Rob. It had puzzled herself, too! But she had not realised how potent a weapon it had proved in showing Rob at last that she was not really the type of girl he wanted to marry.

Katrine glanced at Ann Tulley's hands. They were empty of rings. 'It's very kind of you, Miss—Mrs— Tulley...'

'Miss Tulley,' the young woman said, 'but please make it Ann. You're--?'

'I'm Rob, Rob Bowes. Look, give me your address— no, not the school—I know that. Your home address.' He wrote it down. 'Phone number?'

'He really *is* interested,' Katrine thought, holding back a smile. 'I'm glad, I'm really glad. And it seems by the way she's looking at him that she likes him too. If only my problems were as easily solved!' A sigh escaped her, but Rob and his new friend, Ann, did not even notice.

The following evening, the young man who had spoken at the meeting, and whose name, it appeared, was Jim Rayburn, called Katrine at her grandfather's home.

'I've just been looking through the local paper,' he said excitedly, 'and there's a notice of a meeting of the Education Committee at County Hall the day after tomorrow. It's open to the public and it's at three o'clock in the afternoon. What do you say to getting a few parents together and attending it in the public gallery?'

Katrine, knowing that Rob would take over her class, agreed at once. 'How do we get there, Jim? It's about half an hour's drive.'

'Depending on how many can come, we can pile into cars. I'll call for you at the school. Okay?'

'Right. Good luck in mustering the crowds!'

Although Katrine told Rob about attending the Education Committee meeting, she did not tell her grandfather. Her absence could be explained by the fact that she would normally be at school at that time. And later, he would assume she had gone out with Rob, as she occasionally did.

Next day, Katrine was on playground duty when Andy Brown came running up to her. Since the day he had battered her and she had cuddled him instead of scolding him, he had often run across to her at break- time and

momentarily put his hand in hers. Katrine knew that he sought for reassurance in his sadly depleted world.

He found her hand, squeezed it, gave smile for smile and ran back to his friends.

Human relationships, Katrine told herself, as she watched him rejoin his friends—that was what mattered above all else in this world, good human relationships. Her thoughts jerked to a stop and she thought, stricken, Why don't I apply such a principle to my own life, my own actions? Why can't I soften in my attitude towards Lex Moran, try to put our acquaintance on a better footing, let him see the better side of me? No, she reproached herself, I will not think about Lex Moran...

At that moment, she had to think about him. A sleek white car had slid to a stop outside the school. Two men emerged and walked towards the gates, which were locked as a precaution against children rushing into the road.

Since she was the teacher on duty, Katrine knew she must unfasten the padlock. Now was her chance, she told herself, to try to make amends for her recent behaviour to Lex Moran. The key, taken from her pocket fitted and turned in the padlock.

'Good morning, Miss Hume.' Lex Moran's voice was brisk and detached. It was as if she was a stranger, as if she had never been in his arms, never felt his lips bearing down on hers, as though he had every right, a lover's right, to take as many kisses as he pleased...

Katrine brought a smile from her depths. It must have been a dazzling one because the short, stocky man beside Lex responded immediately with a beaming smile of his own. 'Delighted to meet you, Miss Hume. Your fame has gone before you.' Katrine coloured and frowned, puzzled. 'Is this the spitf--' He cleared his throat. 'Is this the young lady of whom you were telling me, Lex? I can't believe it.' His quick glance took in her hair, her wide, bright eyes, her full lips. 'Honey and sweetbreads and golden sunsets. That's what she reminds me of, not a--'

'Is Mr Bowes available, Miss Hume?' The curt question from Lex Moran cut across his companion's words. It was not difficult, however, for her to guess the phrases which Lex Moran had used to describe her.

The smile was turned on again and upwards. 'Yes, Mr Moran. He's in his Study. Shall I take you?' The smile stayed in place, the eyes shone with a dazzling welcome.

'I know the way.' He looked around. 'Your place is here!.' His eyes returned to her and they were sarcastic. 'Cuddling Andy Brown. Come on, Steve, this way.'

Katrine held on to the smile until the two men had gone into the school building. Then the smile went beyond recall. So much for her efforts to improve relations between herself and the chairman of the Education Committee! It was plain it would take a long time for him to forgive her for the indignity she had thrust upon him. If he ever did ...

At lunchtime, Rob was noncommittal about the visit of Lex Moran and his companion.

'Was it about the closure of the school?' Katrine asked.

'That was one of the subjects discussed, yes.'

Katrine waited, but no more came. He was, of course, the head teacher, and as such was in a privileged position. She had no right to question him further, despite their friendship, on a subject which he was so plainly unwilling to discuss. If there had been better news or any hope of a reprieve she knew he would have told her at once.

He raised no objection to her taking time off and going with others to attend the meeting of the Education Committee.

'I'll ring you this evening and let you know--'

'Er—not this evening,' Rob broke in. 'I'm seeing— someone. I mean, meeting a--'

'Friend?' Katrine supplied, smiling, 'It wouldn't be Ann Tulley?'

Rob coloured. 'I hope you don't mind, Katrine.'

'I'm delighted, and I mean that. I've been trying to tell you for ages that you should put all thoughts of me out of your head. She's—she's very nice, Rob.'

'Thanks.' He twisted a pencil round. 'I think so, too.'

So, Katrine thought, as she left to join Jim Rayburn whose car had pulled up outside the school, that's two people well on their way to their 'happy ever after'. She was glad, she told herself—fiercely, because she had to believe it herself if she was to convince others—that she was a career girl and that marriage was not for her.

On the journey, Jim packed three other people into his car—the mother of a small girl at the school and the parents of two other children. Outside the impressive white concrete and glass building which was County Hall, an excited group had gathered. Katrine, being the secretary, took charge.

'At first, we'll listen. Then--'

'The public are not supposed to interrupt,' said a man the others called Ben. 'We're only allowed to listen. If we break the rules, they're entitled to ask us to leave.'

Katrine shrugged, already knowing the rules. 'There are teacher-representatives on the Education Committee,' she told them, 'and two are from the primary schools section. They must know our problems, they'll give us their support.'

Soon the small crowd filed into the building. A security officer led them up the winding stairs and opened the door into the semi-circular public gallery. The area it overlooked was impressive.

'The meetings aren't usually held here in the main council chamber,' he explained. 'But because the public are being allowed to attend, they're meeting here today as it's got a public gallery.'

If it's money they're worried about, Katrine thought bitterly, they've certainly spared no expense here! The council chamber was semi-circular, with tiered seats sloping upwards from the floor. In the centre was a long table and six or seven chairs. They were high-backed and important-looking. The central chair was more solid and elaborate than the others, carved and velvet-covered.

When the members of the Education Committee filed in, there were many more than Katrine had envisaged—over forty people, she estimated. Her eyes searched eagerly but in vain for the autocratic, slightly frightening, but intensely attractive figure of Lex Moran. When Katrine had decided with deep disappointment that his deputy would be presiding that day, Lex came in leading a line of three or four others.

His dark suit was pin-striped, the white shirt offset by a black and red tie of impeccable taste. His bearing was proud, his black hair springing, yet lying a little low over his brow. There was his classically-shaped nose, the mouth which, as Katrine knew from experience, could take over and entirely monopolise a woman's lips.

So absorbed was she in studying the man, she did not notice at first that his eyes had scanned the public gallery and had come to rest on her own animated features. When she caught the raised eyebrow, she jerked to personal awareness and coloured deeply. There was no forgiveness in the man, it seemed. 'You'll pay for this,' he had warned when she had ordered him from the school hall.

Lex Moran took the central chair. On one side of him sat the Chief Education Officer, a middle-aged man whom Katrine knew by sight. On the other was another man known to Katrine as the Assistant Education Officer for primary schools. It seemed that they were all set to make a strategic attack on Charton village school! One of the others seated at the central table was a grey-haired woman who, as soon as the talking began, started making notes. She was, it seemed, the Committee's secretary.

The meeting began quietly and Katrine sat in the front row of the public gallery, listening idly. Behind and around her were about twelve of her supporters in the 'Save Our School' campaign.

When at last the Chief Education Officer stood and said, 'I should like to inform this meeting of the facts concerning the proposed closure of Charton primary school,' Katrine straightened and clasped her hands tightly on her lap.

First and foremost, the man said, was financial consideration. If the school were closed, it would be a means of saving money. Incensed, Katrine called out, 'What about the cost of hiring a bus and the cost of conveying the children to and from another school?'

A woman beside her put out a nervous hand. 'We're not allowed to say anything--'

The chairman rose, tilted his head back and looked straight at Katrine. Anger tightened his lips and deepened the cleft in his chin. 'If there is not silence from the public gallery, it will be cleared.' He sat down.

'Secondly,' the council official went on, 'there is the considerable age and poor condition of the building.'

Unable to sit quietly and allow the false statements to go unchallenged, Katrine stood again, unheeding of the 'hushes' around her and of the chairman's staring, furious eyes.

'It may be old,' she cried, 'but it's in excellent repair. A little paint--'

Lex Moran twisted to face her. 'If the member of the public who keeps interrupting, despite my warning, breaks the rules once more, she will have to face the consequences.'

There was a breath-holding silence and Katrine sat down. Thank goodness, she thought, no one could see the pounding of her heart, the blood surging through her body, the fear which was a cold hand under her ribs.

'Then,' the speaker continued, 'there is the matter of falling numbers on the school register. We have conducted a survey in the area, made house-to-house calls to estimate the numbers of children under school age who would be expected to attend the school in the next few years. The

numbers calculated do not justify the continued financing of a school which is fast running down.'

She had to say it, she could not keep quiet! Katrine cried out in anguish, 'Of course the population isn't increasing! The planning committee refused permission for the building of ten or twelve houses--'

'Evict the girl,' the chairman ordered, 'in fact, clear the public gallery.'

'That's not fair,' Jim Rayburn called out. 'We've kept quiet. Why can't we stay?'

'Clear the gallery!' the chairman insisted.

'It's not democratic,' another protester retorted. 'We've a perfect right--'

'If I as chairman order the gallery to be cleared,' Lex Moran rapped out, 'then it's cleared. Blame your leader. You should keep her in order.'

'Shall we call the police, sir?' the woman clerk asked Lex Moran, her voice deliberately raised.

'If necessary, Miss White, if necessary,' came the irritable answer. He raised his eyes and watched as the campaigners filed slowly out.

'I'm staying!' Katrine's defiant voice rang out across the council chamber. There were angry murmurs from the councillors.

The woman secretary's hand went to the telephone. 'Police, sir?'

'Police? No. I can handle her.' Lex threw down the pile of papers he was holding, pushed back the chair and made for the flight of stairs which led to the public gallery.

Katrine saw him coming. She began to shake, not knowing his intention. Would he persuade, soothe,

talk her round? When at last he faced her, she could feel the rage which he himself was feeling, but in her it turned into stark, cold fear.

When his hands came out and fastened on her arms, - through the pain the pressure of his fingers inflicted she was vaguely aware of gasps and murmurs from the spectators below. The jaw above her eyes was rigid, the eyes hard and glinting as faceted diamonds. They possessed not an atom of warmth or clemency.

'You've asked for this,' he said between his teeth, 'and by God, you're going to get it!' He took her by the shoulders, spun her so that her back was to him and wrapped his arms about her waist. She was lifted from her feet and carried easily, humiliatingly, from the public gallery.

She would go down fighting! Her legs swung, her body twisted, but her struggles only served to tighten the suffocating hold of those muscle-laden arms. 'Put me down!' she shrieked. 'Leave me alone. You're h- hurting me!'

'It's time someone brought you to your senses. It's a strong hand you need, and I possess two very, very strong ones. And I swear that if necessary, I'll use them good and hard on you.'

When they reached the glass-enclosed entrance * lobby, Lex put her on to her feet. She was winded and bent double with the pain that swept her at the release of the pressure of his body against hers, the grip of his arms around her.

But he had not finished with her yet. 'Come on,' he said, 'out, right outside.'

'No, no!' All around were her friends, fellow- protesters to witness her final humiliation. 'Please, I'll behave.'

'That I won't believe. Out, I said,' he repeated, 'and out you go.'

He took her by the collar of her dress and marched her out, her limbs hanging as if she were a puppet, her head drooping as if she were a broken doll.

On the other side of the glass door, Katrine put her hands over her face. Any moment now the tears would come, the shock would shake her. She uncovered her eyes and she said with trembling lips,

'Have you had your revenge now, Mr Moran? Have you purged the humiliation I inflicted on you the other evening at the school by inflicting it on me instead?' A sob tore at her chest. 'At least I didn't h- hurt you. I didn't bruise you...'

She sank on to the top step and cried bitterly. For a moment she was conscious of his legs beside her, then she knew he had gone.

Her friends gathered round her, praising her for her courage in speaking out and condemning the committee chairman for treating her so roughly.

Jim Rayburn sat on the stone step beside her and rested his arm across her shoulder. 'Mop up, Katrine,' he said. 'At least we've made our point, which wouldn't have happened if everyone had sat silently as we were supposed to do.'

He was being kind, she thought, and trying to ease her position in front of the others. He, no doubt, thought secretly as Rob Bowes and her grandfather would have done if they had heard her outburst, that she had done their cause no good.

'I'm not beaten, Jim,' said Katrine, drying her tears. The mere thought of Lex Moran's treatment of her was stirring her defiance to renewed life. If he thought he had finally crushed her, he would soon discover how wrongly he had misread her character.

A crowd of people was emerging from the building behind them, dispersing in all directions.

Jim Rayburn, with his arm still across Katrine's shoulders, said, 'It's the Education Committee. I wonder why? There's Mr Moran, Katrine.' He looked at her bent head. 'He's seen you.'

'Is he coming over?' she whispered, half fearful, half in hope.

'No. Wait a minute,' he patted her back, 'I'll find out what's going on.'

He left her side and she heard him ask, 'Mr Moran? Can you tell us if you've reached a decision?'

Katrine raised her head, eyes alert now. Lex Moran's cool, authoritative tones damped down any hope she might have felt. 'The meeting was adjourned until another day. The next meeting will not be open to the public.'

Jim frowned. 'Why not, Mr Moran? It's still a public matter. If we were allowed in today--'

'Blame your campaign leader for her ill-judged outburst. Ask her to curb her slightly immature impetuosity.' His eyes dwelt on her coldly and Katrine curled her toes. 'By her action, she's probably healed any divisions that existed inside the committee itself, and pushed them, in their entirety, towards the final decision.'

'Which is, Mr Moran?' She tried to match the coldness in his voice, but failed sadly.

He walked slowly towards her, gazing narrow-eyed at her tear-stained face. She wished she was not still sitting so childishly on the step, enabling him to stare down at her as if she were a member of some inferior species.

'The closure of the school, Miss Hume.' The others, except for Jim Rayburn, had gone down the steps, leaving them discreetly alone. Lex Moran said with quiet anger, 'Will you never learn? Will you never check that stupidly impulsive tongue of yours?'

She pushed her hair from her face. 'Are you reprimanding me, Mr Moran, for speaking the *truth*?'

He considered her for a long moment, then shook his head as if concluding that she was beyond hope. He glanced at his watch. 'Please excuse me—I

have another meeting to attend. One concerning my own business affairs.' He smiled, but without amusement. 'One at which no crusading, law-breaking young rebel will leap to her feet and storm at those who, if spoken to in gentle, coaxing tones, might be her friends but who, if raged at, could probably turn into her implacable enemies.' He walked down the steps, saying, 'Good afternoon, Miss Hume,' turning his head, 'Mr Rayburn.'

They watched as he slid into the driving seat of his Rolls-Royce. The car purred into the traffic and disappeared. Resentment welled up as Katrine watched Lex Moran drive away. His behaviour towards her had been inexcusable. He had manhandled her to such an extent that she would feel the bruises his fingers had pressed into her flesh for some time to come. Yet he had gone without a word of apology.

All right, she thought, walking down the steps with Jim Rayburn, so she had broken the rules. But he could have warned her what he intended to do if she hadn't left the council chamber voluntarily. But of course he didn't! He had *wanted* to throw her out, with his own arms and hands, to salve his wounded pride. It had been an act prompted solely by revenge. She had heard the gasps of the other council members. Even they had been shocked.

She would not let him get away unscathed. 'Listen, everyone,' Katrine said. 'We made a plan. Let's carry it out. We decided that, if necessary, we'd occupy the chairman of the Education Committee's house. We know he's gone to another meeting, which means he won't be at home.'

'So how do we get in?' a woman asked.

'We can't break in, that's for sure,' said another.

'Leave it to me,' Katrine said. 'I'll think of something.'

They packed into the cars in which they had arrived and drove back to the village, passing through it and climbing the hill towards Charton House.

They parked the cars just off the road. Since the plan had been put into operation so impetuously, they had not given thought to the length of time

they might need to spend at Lex Moran's house in order to force him to promise them his support.

The front door opened and the housekeeper stood there. She was heavily-built, white-haired and pale, with a frown creasing her forehead. It was not caused by irritation but, Katrine guessed, by physical weakness.

'Good afternoon, Mrs McBride,' Katrine said brightly. 'I don't know whether you know me, but—'

'Miss Hume, isn't it?' the housekeeper replied, her voice a little weak. 'The village schoolteacher?'

Katrine nodded. 'I have been here before. Not so long ago, either. Mr Moran brought me after I'd had an—accident at school.'

Mrs McBride nodded. 'I remember. Can I help you, miss? I'm not feeling too good today. I phoned Miss Holland at the chemist's, and she said I should really go to the doctor but said she could probably give me something to help me. If I didn't feel better tomorrow then I'd have to go to the doctor. I was just thinking of having a rest, but...'

'Please don't let us stop you, Mrs McBride. It's just that we wondered if Mr Moran was at home?'

The housekeeper shook her head. 'He'll be in for his evening meal, though, maybe earlier. Shall I tell him you called?'

'I—er—did wonder, Mrs McBride,' Katrine said quickly, 'if you would allow us to come in and await his return.' The housekeeper was about to shake her head when Katrine said, 'You see, some of my friends have come from some distance, and it would be difficult for them to go away and come back again.'

Well, she consoled herself, it was partly true, wasn't it? One or two had come from villages some distance away, villages which had fought similar battles—and all of which had been lost.

It was plain that Mrs McBride felt too weak to argue. The door was pulled open and the group walked in. Katrine sighed with relief. This was the first and main obstacle overcome. With Mrs McBride upstairs in bed, their task would be easier than she had dared to imagine.

'I know the way to Mr Moran's living-room, Mrs McBride. There's no need for you to show us.'

The housekeeper nodded, waited for Katrine to lead her friends away, and then she made thankfully for the stairs.

They arranged themselves around the room, and when the chairs and settees had been filled, they sat on the deep-piled carpet. Katrine joined them on the floor and the long wait began.

CHAPTER SIX

THE time passed more quickly than they had anticipated. They talked and joked and discussed the progress of the campaign. The mothers exchanged notes on who had agreed to look after their children on their return from school.

Since they originally assumed that the council meeting would have continued for some time, most of the mothers had taken care of an early evening meal for their small sons and daughters. Once Lex Moran came home, they did not anticipate that it would take them long—after all, they had him at their mercy—to persuade him to see, and accept, their point of view.

When the knock on the door came, Katrine nearly fainted with shock. Did the housekeeper open the door to her employer every evening? Fearing that if the knock came again, Mrs McBride would be disturbed, Katrine ran into the hall, crossed its width and flung open the entrance door.

Lex Moran stood on the step searching for his keys. He looked up, saw the red-haired, nervously-smiling girl welcoming him home and nearly dropped the bunch of keys in his hand.

'What the hell are you doing here? Where's Mrs McBride?'

'Please come in,' Katrine said graciously. 'It's all- right, Mr Moran, we haven't manhandled her, as you did me.'

His narrowed eyes swept over her. 'You look in perfect physical shape to me.'

Katrine coloured at the way his eyes rested momentarily on her swelling breasts, but smiled his sarcasm away. 'Your housekeeper isn't feeling well. She's gone to bed.'

'So you've decided to take her place?' The clipped, cynical tones acted like a pin-prick, but Katrine knew she must not allow herself to be provoked.

Calmness, casualness and supreme self-confidence were essential throughout this delicate situation.

'Not exactly. You see, we--'

'We?'

 He listened intently and, hearing the subdued murmur from his living-room, asked, 'What the hell's going on here?'

He brushed past Katrine and flung open his living room door, staring around at the self-consciously smiling faces. These were no professional protesters, just ordinary people, attempting by accepted modern methods, to further their cause.

Lex Moran relaxed slowly and his hard lips widened into a smile. 'So this is what they call a "pressure group". At last I've met one face to face!'

There was general, relieved laughter that he should be taking their action so well. But it seemed that it had not registered completely on his consciousness exactly why they were there until Katrine said,

'We're occupying your home, Mr Moran.'

A swift anger darkened his eyes and took the smile away. Moments later, however, he was in control again. He commented briskly, 'Well, at least I won't be lonely. I hope you'll forgive me, though, if I don't offer to feed you and provide you with sleeping accommodation. The house is large, but it's not a high-class hotel.'

The sardonic note was not meant to be overlooked. He had deliberately embarrassed and disconcerted himself-invited guests and they looked to Katrine to provide a lead. She was, however, as inexperienced as they were in the art of protest and sit-ins. She fidgeted with her hair, neatened her slightly rumpled top—which had the effect of bringing Lex's eyes to the particular area of her anatomy which most seemed to please him.

If his aim was to disconcert her, too, then he had found an excellent way of doing so. In a defensive action, she folded her arms tightly across her front, and for her pains drew from him a derisive smile.

'We'll--' she cleared her throat, 'we'll be no trouble, Mr Moran. We just intend to sit here, that's all.'

He lowered his briefcase to the floor, pushed his hands into his pockets and asked crisply, 'For what purpose?'

'To—to make you see our point of view,' Katrine said bluntly. Too bluntly, it seemed, because his narrowed eyes swung to her again.

'Make me?'

Jim Rayburn broke in swiftly, 'To try and enlist your help in our fight to keep our school open. We thought that you, as a fellow-villager--'

'That's news to me. Your leader here,' he gestured carelessly towards Katrine, 'took the trouble to tell me, in unmistakable terms,, that I'm not a member of the village community. As you probably already know, she threw me out of a public meeting in the village which I was attending perfectly legally.'

His smile said, 'Checkmate.'

Jim tried again. 'We thought, Mr Moran, that as a friend'and supporter of our cause--'

Sharply he responded, 'Who said I was a supporter of your cause? Never at any time have I given any indication as to my personal views on whether the village school should be closed or left alone.'

Another checkmate. A long silence followed, in which he considered speculatively and with interest each member of the group. When he came to Katrine, who had joined Jim Rayburn and the others seated on the carpet, a faint smile flitted across his lips and the laughter-lines around his eyes crinkled momentarily.

Stung by the way she seemed to amuse him, she said with defiance, 'Are you going to call the police, Mr Moran? Are you going to order us out as you did earlier?'

'I could,' he countered, 'since you're all trespassing.'

'We weren't trespassing before, because it was a meeting to which the public were invited, yet you made us leave.'

'You broke the rules, that's why. If you have anything to say to me, wouldn't it be wiser to say it, in a civilised, adult way, all legal and pleasant, without adopting the student and/or trade union tactics of sit-in, illegal occupation, etcetera?' His eyes swung to Katrine. 'Since you're the self-appointed leader of this deputation, I assume you're also their spokesman. So carry on, Miss Hume, I'm listening.'

His half-amused, semi-tolerant, faintly taunting manner riled her. 'You've heard my arguments, Mr Moran, many times, both at public meetings, here in your own home and in the council chamber today. If you still aren't convinced of the rightfulness and common sense of our cause, then,' she shook her head, 'I don't know when you will be.'

'So how is this--' his hand encompassed the uninvited gathering staring a little unnerved, more than a little discomfited, up at him, 'collection of honest, sincere, but misguided---' he glared at Katrine, 'and I mean misguided villagers going to make me alter my views?'

Katrine could find nothing to say.

'Stalemate, Miss Hume?' he asked softly, with a faint smile.

She gritted her teeth and stared up at him. Someone sighed, a woman looked at the glass-covered antique clock ticking the day away on the mantelpiece. Others followed her eyes, seeking the time. They were thinking of their families, their husbands coming home to no food and no welcome.

'Look,' Lex said, rubbing his chin, 'let's relax. I'm human, although I'm sure Miss Hume doubts it,' with a smile, 'I am, like you, a villager. I have Mr Rayburn's word for it, if not Miss Hume's. Shall we all have a drink,' he moved to a cabinet, slid open a door and took out bottles and glasses, 'then I'll show you round the gardens. Charton House must be a familiar sight to

all of you.' He poured drinks. 'But I doubt if any of you have seen it at such close quarters before.'

As he talked, he handed round the drinks, with Jim Rayburn's help. Only Katrine refused. Lex paused, glass in hand, shrugged, then handed the glass to the young woman beside her.

After that, the atmosphere eased considerably, and the chatter became general, with Lex moving around the group acting the perfect host, talking to them as if he had known them personally all their lives.

No Wonder, Katrine thought sourly, wishing she had accepted the drink, he was a successful businessman and that his business had prospered and grown worldwide. He spoke fluently, moving among people who were, after all, his opponents, with immense self-confidence and ease.

If he ever took it upon himself, she reasoned, to try to persuade these people that their cause was not only a lost one, but ill-founded, and that they would actually gain instead of lose by the closure of the school, he would no doubt do so, and probably convince them beyond all doubt!

He said, having tossed down his second drink and put down the glass, 'I can't unfortunately, show you round the house as the noise might disturb my housekeeper, but if you'd care to see the gardens--' he motioned towards double glass doors.

His guests looked at each other uncertainly, then at Katrine. Unable to give them a lead, since she was as confused as they were about their next step, she lifted her shoulders and rose with them. To see the smile of victory on Lex Moran's face—which she was sure she would have found if she had looked at him—would have so provoked her she would not have been able to control the flow of angry words from her lips. Instead, she kept her eyes on the backs of the others as she followed them into the garden.

The word 'garden' was, however, an understatement. Estate, she thought, would have been a description more suited to the extensive area in which the old house stood. Steps led down from a paved area to a terraced lawn.

Beyond this, to the left, was a rose garden with benches and small wooden archways.

There was an area of woodland stretching into the distance. It was towards this that the group wandered, exclaiming at the colour and scents around them, at the care which must have been expended on the upkeep of the gardens deep into the past. It was also plain that the present owner did not lack the funds to employ people to maintain the estate in the excellent condition in which he must have found it on buying the house.

Beyond the garden was the orchard for which Charton House was well-known. In the spring people passing by stopped and took photographs of the mass of apple blossom. Its delicate scent could be detected by sensitive nostrils. In the autumn, people came from far and wide to buy the full, ripe fruit.

A young mother pushed her way to Katrine's side. She whispered, 'Miss Hume, I really must return home. My neighbour's very good and agreed to give my children their tea, but it's my husband ... I'm not backing out, Miss Hume, it's just- -'

Katrine nodded, smiling as understandingly as she could. 'Just slip away. Go through the house and let yourself out. What about transport?'

'It's not far, thanks. I'll walk down to the village.' As the woman left, Katrine thought, One less won't notice. But another of the group had watched the incident and must have decided to follow the other's example. She called across to Katrine,

'I hope you'll forgive me, Miss Hume, but I really will have to go.'

Of course, Lex Moran had heard. Katrine glared at him, daring him to smile, but his face was empty of expression. She gazed around and saw the same slightly strained expression on her friends' faces which told her more loudly than words that they, too, would like to be released from their obligations. Were they all deserting her, every single one?

It seemed that this was so, because even Jim Rayburn looked uncomfortable. He approached and whispered, 'It's not that we're letting you down, Katrine. It's just that it doesn't seem to be having the effect we hoped', so--'

'You can go, all of you.' Katrine's voice was loud and defiant. 'But I'm staying. If Mr Moran wants to get rid of me, he'll have to call the police.'

The others hesitated, acutely embarrassed, plainly feeling that they should remain and support their leader, yet convinced that their plan had misfired.

Katrine thought, It's all gone wrong. I've failed, the school will close and it will be my fault, all my fault!

Involuntarily, she turned and ran, through the wooded area, across the flower-strewn grass, up the steps and into the living-room. She flung herself on to the carpet and with her head and arm on the seat of an armchair, burst into tears.

Her sobs filled her ears and she could hear nothing but her own choked breathing and pounding heart. So it was some time later that she realised she was no longer alone, yet there was a quietness everywhere that puzzled her. It was as though she had been asleep and missed something vital.

The watch on her wrist told her that the time had passed so swiftly, she must have slept! The build-up of tension, the defiance at the meeting, the physical mishandling by an angry man; entering and occupying his house, defying him, daring his wrath, only to be deserted by her supporters—all had conspired to reduce her to such a state of exhaustion that sleep had been her only escape route, and a means of restoring her depleted energies.

She was not alone because Lex Moran sat, legs fully stretched, hands clasped, head back, watching her. He looked what he was—completely at home.

'Sleeping Beauty stirs at last,' he drawled.

Katrine lifted her head and stared at him resentfully, pushing back her dampened hair.

He smiled. 'A somewhat tear-stained, not to say chastened, Sleeping Beauty, but a beauty nonetheless.'

His challenging words aroused her from the semi- stupor into which her sense of failure had plunged her.

'Chastened? You call me chastened?' she demanded.

'If you think you've humbled me by your—your-- ' she felt her arms, her shoulders, 'violent handling of me, and your clever trick in ridding yourself of your unwanted visitors, then think again.'

In spite of her fighting words, her head drooped. She knew that, so far, he had won all the battles and she began to despair of .ever achieving their goal. This man, with his wealth and his elevated position in local society—he had been fairly elected by the votes of ordinary people, many of whom included the villagers—held all the strings, and moreover could tug on them and pull them in whatever direction he pleased and whenever he wanted.

'The others went,' she continued, keeping her eyes on the carpet and running her hand over its springy pile, 'because they were in awe of you. They were born and bred here, like their parents and grandparents. Whoever lives in Charton House is regarded by them as a kind of modern squire.'

Her head came up, eyes defiant. 'I'm only a temporary resident, so I'm not one of them. I don't regard you as some kind of "all-powerful" creature, with inherited rights to rule. The feudal attitude still prevails around here,' she sneered, 'but I'm just an interloper, so I haven't any sense of loyalty to the "local squire".'

Her words seemed only to arouse amusement in him, which provoked her -even more. 'Go on,' she goaded, 'evict me—I'm a trespasser, remember, I'm breaking the rules again. So get your vicious ruthless hands on me, hurt me, throw me out bodily this time...'

Her- voice tailed off. As she talked he had risen, and was walking towards her, arms loose, eyes menacingly narrowed. He said softly, 'So you want my hands on you?' When she shook her head wildly, he said, 'You can't deny it. You've just issued an invitation.' Hands on hips, leg muscles taut and hard, he leaned forward. ' "Vicious, ruthless", I think you described them.' He lifted his hands, glancing from one to the other. 'These hands will oblige, ruthlessly and viciously as instructed.'

'No!' she cried out.

'Too late, Miss Katrine Hume. What you ask for, you get.'

He slipped his hands under her armpits and hauled her to face him. Her upper arms were gripped and his fingers, sinking into the flesh, tugged her against him. Was this the way he had chosen to remove her this time? She winced at the bruising pain, but it was as nothing compared with the force of his lips as he twisted her sideways and hit her mouth with his.

He took a kiss, then lifted his head. 'The only way,' he breathed, 'to keep Miss Katrine Hume's mouth from spilling out accusations and insults and counterproductive charges against anything and anyone in an effort to further her cause is to keep it in bondage. Like this.'

His mouth again took charge of hers, but she could not even struggle any more. His arms had wrapped around her in a hold so secure she could scarcely breathe.

The maleness of him was overwhelming, swamping her powers of resistance, blurring the clear-cut edges of her reasoning, and turning her into a pliant, warm-blooded, passionate woman. Dazedly she realised his kisses had become more tender, less cruel; her responses more eager and fervent.

She grew afraid. Unused to men's demands and desires—she had kept at bay young men too anxious to be on more intimate terms with her—she did not know how, without hurting Lex's feelings, to tell him 'no'.

But, she asked herself bemusedly, as his lips wandered to touch her ear, trail her shoulder beneath the top he had pulled aside, linger on her throat exposed by the drooping backwards of her head, did she want to say 'Stop'?

'Katrine,' Lex whispered, raising his head, and she saw for the first time the warm demand in his eyes, the pulse throbbing in his cheek, 'you're driving me crazy, girl. I told you once before the effect you have on me.'

'You f-fancied me,' she said, hoping to introduce a touch of lightness to divert his attention.

'I want you, my sweet,' he persisted, 'you arouse me until I--' His hands found her midriff which the loosened top had exposed. They caressed and stroked and enticed from her a shivering sigh, a longing to surrender, to batter down the mind-barriers she had erected between herself and all men.

His hands moved upwards, finding the soft, yielding shape of her, and in her joy her lips parted, inviting him to make them his yet again. It was an unconscious entirely feminine reaction over which she could exercise no control. She *wanted* his kisses, she *wanted* the touch of his hands upon her. Because she loved him, she wanted to give of herself as much as he desired to take and make his own.

Because she loved him! The words had come uninvited into her mind and no amount of denial could erase them.

'Will you stop fighting me, Katrine?' he whispered, pulling her closer and looking deep into her eyes. 'Will you stop hurling yourself against me like a bird against a pane of glass, only to drop to the ground and die? Look on me as your friend, not your avowed enemy. When have I ever given you cause to make you think I'm your adversary?'

She stiffened in his embrace. So his lovemaking had not been motivated by tenderness, nor even by physical desire. It had sprung from a hope on his part that by kissing and caressing her he would make his plans for closing the school more acceptable to her and call a halt to the campaign.

Tears of disappointment threatened, but with extreme self-control she suppressed them. 'Is this your method,' she challenged, 'of persuading me to abandon the fight?'

'I'm talking in personal terms, Katrine.' His voice was gentle, yet a note of authority could be detected.

She tore away from him, tugging back her hair and straightening her rumpled top. 'I don't believe you.' The tears might have stayed behind her eyes, but they could not be kept out of her voice. All the same, she had to have her say before it was too late. 'I think you're telling me in a roundabout way that I'm to stop making myself a nuisance and leave you free to go about the business of the school closure without hindrance or protest.'

Hard hands gripped her shoulders and jerked her against him. His mouth took hers brutally and held it, until she struggled. When his lips had had their fill, he held her away. His eyes were narrow. 'The most potent way, as I said earlier, of closing tightly and effectively Katrine Hume's beautiful but wayward mouth.'

The phone rang. Lex cursed under his breath. Knowing his housekeeper was resting, he released Katrine, strode into the hall and lifted the receiver. Through the open door, Katrine heard him say, 'Moran here.'

There was a pause and he spoke again. 'That's good of you, Lara, but don't bother to bring it. I'll come to the dispensary and pick it up.' He listened again. 'When the shop closes? Why?' Katrine who, with folded arms, now stood boldly watching as he lounged against the wall beside the telephone table, noted the slow, spreading smile. He glanced at her, smiled again at what he saw, and turned his back on her. Affronted, Katrine moved away.

'Take you out? Yes, it's about a week since we dined.' He paused and said, 'I could do with some female company—*amenable* female company.' The laughter from the other end was too loud to be missed. 'Come back here afterwards? Why not?'

Katrine thought, Can I leave? If I did, he couldn't stop me, not with Lara Holland on the phone. In order to reach the front door, she had to pass him.

For a moment she stood at the door. He must have heard her, because, to her disappointment, he swung round.

Nevertheless, she raced along the hall, hoping that he would be so surprised by her action he would be caught off guard. But she had underestimated his reflexes. They were instant and took immediate effect. Her wrist was imprisoned in a grip she had come that day to know so well. He said between his teeth, 'Don't go away, Miss Hume. I want a word with you.'

To the caller, he said, 'I've got company. Female, red-haired and a firebrand. Yes, right first time. Get rid of her?' His eyes gleamed. 'I will—when I've finished with her.' He consulted his watch. 'Six-fifteen, I'll be with you.'

There was a movement at the top of the stairs and Mrs McBride stood there. 'Here's the patient now,' he told Lara. He asked his housekeeper how she felt. 'A little better, she says,' Lex told the caller. 'Yes, I'll tell her I'll be collecting her medicine and that she needn't cook me a meal. Which means we'll have the evening to ourselves?'

He slanted a glance at his prisoner, who had begun to fret and chafe at the tightness and audacity of his hold. 'So it does. I'll be with you soon, Lara.'

He glanced upstairs to find his housekeeper gone. She had exercised her discretion and disappeared. Lex urged a reluctant Katrine back into his living-room and released her at last, but remained blocking the doorway as if to prevent any attempt at another escape.

Katrine wished the man were not so attractive, that his eyes were not so perceptive, his lips so full, his chin so stubborn. She wished his air of authority did not daunt her, his broad shoulders make her want to lean against him and seek security, that his lean hips and long legs did not stir in her unfamiliar and alarmingly exciting feelings.

Why did the sight of his long-fingered hands disturb her so, the signet ring on his right hand arouse a strange sense of anxiety? Why did the thought of the evening he was going to spend with Lara Holland cause her to feel such jealousy, she wanted to run at him and scratch away the smile on his face?

Did all this really add up to love? Or was it mere infatuation for someone who was so out of her league she might as well try to sweep the desert clean of sand as think that one day he might consider her as something more than a pissing temptation to his masculine needs?

'What do you want?' she asked.

'Your help.' He considered her tense figure, his eyes becoming thoughtful and pleased at the same time as they rested on her shapeliness, as if recalling the pleasure he had felt in caressing and coaxing her passion to life.

She stirred uncomfortably, hugging herself.

'I'm giving a party for the village kids. If it's fine, on the lawn—if not, in the house. - Mrs McBride will provide the food, but I'll need assistance with handling the thirty or forty little angels who'll be descending on me. I haven't enough experience with children to manage them alone. With your expertise as a teacher, your help would prove invaluable.' She did not answer. 'It would be much appreciated, Katrine.' His eyes were serious, his face without expression.

He expected her to say 'yes'? She would say 'no'. 'Get your girl-friend Lara to give you a hand. She may not have the magic touch of a teacher, but at least she would be able to attend to their wounds when they fall or start fighting.'

His eyes narrowed and his arms folded across his chest. 'That's your final answer?'

Her breath came fast. 'My final answer.' She smiled up at him defiantly. 'You see, I can be as hard as you when I choose.'

The response she expected did not come. For a moment his studied silence made her flounder. Then she blurted out, 'I told you, didn't I, that I'm not really a member of the village community. So I refuse to condone feudalism, in whatever form it may rear its ugly head. The local squire turns bountiful and spends money on the locals—or should I say yokels?— the rustic, cap-raising inhabitants of this ancient village.'

'On second thoughts, Miss Hume, I don't want your help. You can go to hell.'

His hooded eyes, his hard mouth—which had so recently covered and explored and possessed her own —his vaguely menacing attitude, his wounding, dismissing words, had the tears springing to her eyes and a lump forming in her throat.

Well, she had asked for all of it, hadn't she? Her acid tongue had run away with her again and the man at whom she had flung her words was not the kind to forgive and forget, to kiss and make up.

'Let me see you to the door,' he said with icy politeness, and did so.

Without a glance back, she went from his house, head high, a swagger in her stride. It was all make-believe, to mask her injured pride.

For the second time that day he had managed to evict her, for eviction it was even though it had been in a slightly more gentlemanly manner. And what was more, in spite of her determination to remain where she was until he conceded victory, he had cleared his residence of every single member of the occupying group.

He had even had the audacity to ask for her assistance in giving a party for the village children, the very people whose school he was plotting to close.

As she let herself into her grandfather's house, he came down the stairs. He glanced at her and smiled, and hers was strained in return.

'We went to an Education Committee meeting,' she said.

'Did you, love?' He watched as she looked at herself in the hall mirror. 'Well, what happened? Did the committee decide for or against?'

'The committee?' It all seemed so far away, the Education Committee meeting, the retreat in disarray, that she almost had difficulty in recalling it. She shook her head. 'They threw us out. At least, Mr Moran threw—and I mean threw—me out. The others did as they were told.'

'And you didn't. So the chairman himself used strong-arm tactics!' Thomas laughed. 'Can't say I can really blame him. When you refuse to budge, you're like a donkey.'

Katrine grimaced. 'Thanks, Grandfather. Criticism from my nearest and dearest now!'

He patted her shoulder placatingly and she winced. He had touched one of her bruises, but he did not notice her action. 'Sounds like you had a rough time.'

'That's not all.' She told him about going to Lex Moran's house, about their brief occupation of it, about the way he had manipulated the others and persuaded them to leave, and how she herself refused. She did not tell him about the kissing and the love-making. The very thought of what had taken place between Lex Moran and herself had the colour flooding her cheeks.

She busied her hands with preparing the evening meal. As Thomas helped her, she said, 'Mr Moran's giving a party for the village children on Saturday.'

Thomas nodded. 'It's an annual event.'

'He asked me to help him, I said "no".'

'But Katrine, why?'

'Why? Because of the way he treated me, the way he refuses to listen to reason about the school. He's the enemy. Grandfather, not a friend of the village.'

'The children love his parties, Katrine.' Thomas's voice sounded doubtful. 'There are games, plenty of food, an entertainer.'

She clashed saucepans together, making a jarring noise. 'I don't think people really realise just what kind of opposition we're up against in our fight, Grandfather'. Lex Moran's stubborn and ruthless. He refuses to listen to, let alone understand, other people's problems.' She faced Thomas.

'Grandfather, I just couldn't go against my principles and help the man. In fact,' she turned back to the sink, running the tap too fast, 'I think the villagers themselves should back me up. I think they should keep their children at home.'

'You mean not send them to the party?' Thomas sounded aghast. 'But it's the event of the year as far as the children are concerned.'

'All the same, I'm going to try and stop them.'

'What do you mean, child? How can you stop them?'

Katrine kept her back to her grandfather's frown. 'You'll see, Grandfather.'

There was a worried pause, then she added, 'I can't do it on my own. I'll need help.'

'Well, don't count on me, dear. First of all, I'm too old. And I'm not going to be drawn into any mad-brained scheme to cause trouble among the villagers.'

She faced him. 'There's trouble already, Grandfather. And I'm not the one causing it. It's Mr Moran and his councillor colleagues. They want to close down the school; I want to keep it open. It's as simple as that. And I'm going to do everything in my power to make them change their minds.'

'But stopping little kiddies going to a party won't help, dear,' Thomas persisted. 'It's a private thing, given by Mr Moran. Look, take my advice. Don't mix up Mr Moran's private life with his public life. One's got nothing to do with the other.'

She said, her voice full, 'You don't know, Grandfather, you just don't know.'

Thomas looked at her with a mixture of compassion and curiosity, but did not question her. 'All the same, Katrine, you'll be playing with fire if you try to interfere with Mr Moran's good intentions towards the villagers.'

'It's all so feudal,' she burst out. but her grandfather was*shaking his head, 'and—and so hypocritical. He gives them a party with one hand and takes away their school with the other.'

'You're talking about it as though it's an accomplished thing. There's been no decision yet, has there?'

'Maybe not,' Katrine said with a shrug, 'but it's quite plain what that decision will be. The school will close and,' she turned from the cooker, 'if it does, do you realise I'll lose my job?'

'You'll find another, dear,' Thomas soothed.

'Not so easily. And certainly not in this area. Which means I'll have to move away from you.' Thomas said nothing, finding a chair. Katrine smiled. 'Maybe you'd be glad to be rid of me?'

Thomas laughed and shook his head. 'You've got a heart of gold, Katrine, but you like your own way. If you don't get it, there's all hell let loose, isn't there?' He looked at her fondly. 'Just like your dad. I can see him in you in everything—your determination and--'

'Go on, say it,' she smiled affectionately, 'my pig-headedness.'

Her grandfather laughed again. 'You've said it for me.'

'Well, I'm going to live up to the reputation you've given me. I'll do my darnedest to make sure that on the day of the party, Mr Lex Moran's tables will not be lined with children, but empty seats.'

Thomas shook his head, as though giving his granddaughter up.

At school next morning, Katrine told Rob Bowes of her plan and asked for his help. He frowned, thought for a long time, then, as she waited eagerly for his answer, like her grandfather, he shook his head.

'Its effect will be nil. In fact, it might even damage our cause.'

Katrine felt so let down, she lost her temper. 'You're all the same,' she stormed, 'you say you don't want the school closed, but you'll do nothing practical to prevent it. I could understand you not coming to the Education Committee meeting, but I can't understand your refusal to deny Lex Moran his chance to play the local squire living at the great house overlooking his peasants and giving them feasts now and then to keep them happy and content under his rule.'

She beat her fist on the desk. 'We're not living two or three hundred years ago, Rob. We're living in an age in which the year 2000 is already casting its shadow forward. If the children don't go to his party, it would put him in his place as an ordinary villager—as he pretends to like to be regarded. And at the same time it would be an expression of the village's disapproval of the step we all know he intends to take sooner or later of closing the school.'

Rob sighed, leaning back in his chair. 'You'll have to count me out, Katrine. Anyway,' he fidgeted with a pencil, 'I've got a—a prior appointment.'

It was, of course, with Ann Tulley. Katrine guessed that their friendship must be ripening fast. She was glad, she told herself, she was delighted—so why the strange twist of pain inside her?

It certainly was not jealousy, because she wished them well. Envy, something inside her asked, a longing that she, too, might have a friendship with a man—the man she loved—which promised to become a relationship much closer than mere friendship? And if so, why did a face—a strong, handsome, resolute face, with a cleft in the chin and a dangerous glint in the eyes—come to mind? It was a sign of weakness and she shook the image away.

In the end, it was Jim Rayburn who went with her, moving from house to cottage, cottage to house, asking mothers to keep their children at home on the day of the party; pleading with parents to deny their children, just this once, the pleasure of going to the big house for their annual treat.

When the children joined their parents at the front doors, their faces fell, but when Katrine explained gently that it was for their sakes they were asking this sacrifice, because the man who was giving the party was trying to take

away their school, the children nodded, but plainly without understanding why.

Katrine returned home delighted with the result of their efforts. Not one child would be attending Lex Moran's party, she told her grandfather. He looked disapproving, but did not reproach her.

That night in bed, Katrine tossed and turned. The day after tomorrow, she thought, Lex Moran would feel, as he had never felt it before, the displeasure of the village he was slowly trying to extinguish—because that was what would happen if he closed the school.

So, with her mission accomplished, why couldn't she sleep? Why was her body so restless, her thoughts going round in circles, her heart beating dully instead of delightedly at her triumph?

CHAPTER SEVEN

ON the day of the party, there was a brooding kind of waiting in the streets of the village. Traffic came and went as usual along the main street, coming from distant towns and passing on to even more distant towns.

Why aren't they involved, too? Katrine thought. How can they pass through the village so impartially? Can't they feel the tension in the air? Don't they know there's a storm about to break? As she stood at the kerb and watched the traffic go by, she thought, They should know, they should realise that the girl they are passing is the source of the turbulence that, in an hour or two, would envelop the village—which to them was a mere dot on the map—and maybe even tear it apart?

With a hand to her head, she turned away and walked back to her grandfather's house. It's all too much, she told herself, the strain, the guilt ... The *guilt*, she thought, holding her throat. What crime have I committed that I should feel guilty?

At the house she sank into a chair. Now it was the time at which the children, if they had been going to the party, would be leaving their homes. Now cars would have been driving off, filled with excited occupants, dressed in their party best. Now the excitement would have been reaching its peak as they drew up at the doors of Charton House.'

Instead the children were in their houses, probably watching the clock as she was doing, the small girls thinking of the party dresses which had been bought or made for them, the boys thinking of the laden tables, the games, the prizes...

Now it was half an hour past the time when the party had been due to begin. Katrine had never spent a worse half hour in her life. When she became conscious of herself, dragging her thoughts away from what might have been, she noticed how stiff her limbs and hands had grown with the tension of waiting.

Her grandfather had gone into the town. He had said that, although he supported her cause, he wanted no part in her plans to spoil the children's

fun. So she had been left alone to face the guilt, the painful reflections of the enormous repercussions her action might have on the future of the village school.

The telephone shrieked into the heavy silence, shocking her to her feet and out into the hall. Only as her hand lifted the receiver did she guess who the caller might be. It was too late by then to ring off. She mumbled her name and when the stream of words hit her ear, she winced and her hand felt for the banister rail beside the telephone.

'So what do you think you're up to now?' Lex Moran demanded. 'What was the great idea behind you and your youthful male friend doing a dirty trick like canvassing each set of parents and persuading them to boycott the Charton House party? Who the hell do you think you're hurting? Me? Not on your sweet life you're not. You're hurting the village kids who look forward all year to the parties I give, the presents I hand out, to the food and entertainment I provide.'

He paused for breath, but it was not long enough for her to answer his accusations with those of her own.

'It's as well I'm not where you are, Miss Katrine Hume,' he spat out her name, 'because I would put you across my knee and pound your backside until you shrieked for mercy!'

She rallied under his onslaught. 'What are you going to do now, Mr Moran?' she taunted. 'Go round the cottages handing out the untouched food to the local peasants like the feudal lord you think you are?'

'No, Miss Hume, I'm going round the village in my car. I'm going to each and every house and cottage where there are kids. I'm going to tell them what a little liar you are. Then I'm going to collect every child I can cram into my car, and those I can't get in, no doubt their parents will take them, so that they'll have their party after all.'

'So you'll play the Pied Piper,' she commented acidly. 'And like him, you'll lead them all to their doom. Then when you take away their school, you

hope their parents will say to them, Never mind, you had a lovely time at Mr Moran's party.'

'You're talking a load of garbage, Miss Hume, and you know it. If my language offends you, then let me assure you that when I'm really roused I can do a whole lot better. So if you're thinking up any more outrages, think again, because I'm warning you, if you interfere in my life again, I'll make *your* life a misery!' He slammed down the receiver.

Katrine slumped on to a chair and covered her face.

Some time later, Thomas returned. He did not seem surprised to see his granddaughter stretched out face down on the living-room carpet sobbing her heart out.

'The kids have all gone to Mr Moran's party, Katrine,' Thomas said a little haltingly, as if unsure whether she would rise up and attack him like a verbal tigress, or remain lying listlessly where she was, quiet now as a child exhausted from weeping after well- deserved punishment.

'I know.' Her voice was muffled. 'I watched them going from the front window.'

'Did—did Mr Moran come here, dear?'

She shook her head, her damp forehead moving against the worn pile of the carpet. 'He phoned.'

'What did he say?'

'C-called me n-names, abused me, said he'd persuade the parents to let their children go.' She sat up, dragging her hair from her moist cheeks. 'He did an excellent job, didn't he?' she went on bitterly. 'They listened to him. They're—they're traitors to the cause.'

'I think you're misjudging the situation, Katrine.'

She stood unsteadily and her grandfather found a seat. 'No, I'm not. Tell me, Grandfather, tell me why I should put myself out for them any longer?' she pleaded, seeking every possible justification for her action to stop the party. 'I speak at public meetings on their behalf. I write letter after letter to the authorities. I entreat the man who makes the decisions to change his mind and keep the school open. I even get thrown bodily out of the Council chambers by that man, because I had the courage to speak my mind and not give in like a coward.'

Katrine sank into an armchair, putting a palm to her overheated forehead.

Thomas, who had listened patiently to her outburst, shook his head. 'I know a lot of what you say is true, dear, but--' he scratched his thinning grey hair, 'it's human nature, isn't it? They probably didn't connect sending their children to the party with the closing of the school.'

'But it would have been a *gesture*. Didn't they understand? Keeping their children away would have told Lex Moran just what they thought of him.'

'I think you've got it wrong, dear,' her grandfather said gently. 'They think a lot of Mr Moran. They respect him for his success in business—he achieved it all himself, you know—and they trusted him enough to vote for him and make him their representative on the County Council.'

Katrine sighed. 'Which is probably why they left the public gallery when he told them to the other day, and why they left his house instead of staying on as I tried to do. And,' with another sigh, 'why they gave in this afternoon about the party.' She sank on to a chair again, shaking her head. 'Without their support, it's hopeless. I can't conduct a one-woman battle against the whole local authority, which includes a man as powerful and strong-minded as Lex Moran.'

Thomas said softly, as if trying to prepare her for another shock, 'They'll all be going to the dance to- . night.'

She frowned. 'What dance?'

'Mr Moran's. At Charton House. He always gives one on the evening of the children's party. It's for the parents, and any of the old folk who care to go.'

'Is it by invitation?' Katrine asked. 'I mean, is it all formal, with--'

'Quite informal. And no invitations, either. Anyone who likes can go, anyone living in the village, I mean. I could. You could.'

Katrine caught her breath. 'I could? No, thank you, I--'

Thomas rubbed his ear. 'It might be a good idea if you did. Now don't jump down my throat, Miss Daughter-of-your-father.' Katrine smiled. 'No compromise, just like him. No tact, no subtlety.'

That stung, and Katrine rose to the challenge. 'No finesse, Grandfather? Are you accusing me of lack of perception, of indiscretion?'

He began to nod, thought better of it and said, 'I really meant not playing your cards right. Sometimes, in some situations, love,' he said kindly, 'it's better to use a delicate touch.'

'So I'm heavy-handed now?' Tears began to rise again.

Thomas lifted his shoulders. 'You do miss a few tricks. Anyway,' he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, 'I won't be going. Dancing and socialising's not for me at my age. I like my own pals, a drink or two, meeting my friends at the pub.' He raised his head. 'That's where you'll find the old 'uns tonight— at the pub. It's the young 'uns, the parents, the girls and their boy-friends, who go to the Charton House dance. People your age, not mine.' He sighed and closed his eyes again.

Katrine softened at once, looking at her grandfather, seeing the lines of living, of laughter, concentration, work and effort, all imprinted there by the passing of the years and a long and happy married life with her grandmother. Lines of sorrow, too, at her death two years before.

Katrine left the room quietly, leaving him to doze and dream. I must, she thought, be quite a trial to Grandfather sometimes. She knew that her father

had not been an easy son for them to manage. Even in his middle years, although well loved by his wife and family, he was not an easy husband and father.

Now her grandfather, having seen a recalcitrant son into manhood, had that son's daughter wished on him, a daughter who bore so many of her father's characteristics—and principles.

Perhaps, she thought, staring out of the kitchen window, I should leave, find somewhere else to live. Maybe it's me who's wearing Grandfather out.

'Thoughtful, love?' Her grandfather in the doorway took her by surprise. So he had not gone to sleep. 'What's troubling you, Katrine?'

She saw his lean, slightly bent figure, saw her own father fleetingly in him, and said, smiling, 'I was just thinking I might be a burden to you. The way I go on—I just can't help it, Grandpa.' It was her childhood name for him. 'It's just that I like to fight for what I think is right. But I don't want to be a worry to you. Maybe you'd like me to find a room somewhere and leave you in peace.'

'Lass, what are you talking of? A burden to me? Leave me in peace? Why, I wouldn't have a moment's peace if you weren't here with me. How would I know what you were up to, what other bits of mischief you were concocting in that pretty head of yours?'

Katrine put her arms round him. 'I'm not all bad, you know. I'm not really as bad as—as——' the name caught in her throat, 'as Mr Moran seems to think I am.'

'*Bad?* Why, you're a bonny girl, Katrine. You're good all through. No granddaughter of mine had better be anything else!'

They laughed again and the tension eased.

It was when the joyful voices of happy children could be heard returning from the party that Katrine thought about phoning Rob Bowes. If he were going to the Charton House dance ...

'Rob?' she said into the telephone. 'Are you going to Lex Moran's place tonight?'

'As a matter of fact, I am,' Rob answered. Katrine wondered at the note of strain. 'Ann's coming too.' Now she knew the reason for his discomfiture. Somehow she had to reassure him. 'I'm glad to hear it, Rob. I mean that sincerely.'

'Thanks, Katrine.'

'Rob, about the dance, is it right to go? I mean, we are fighting the man--'

'Tell me, Katrine, what good would it do our campaign if we stayed away? We wouldn't be missed. It's something everyone goes to every--'

'Just like the annual Charton House party,' she interrupted sharply.

'I'm sorry that didn't work either, Katrine. The parents did their best, but in the end, they had to let their children go to Moran's house. They would never have heard the last of it from their kids if they hadn't, now would they? We're teachers, we know children inside out. They nag, they niggle until they get their own way ...'

'Okay, Rob, you're right. I'm wrong. I'm always wrong--'

'Katrine, I told you I'm sorry about everything. What more can I say?' He sighed and it was such an exasperated sigh it reminded her of her grandfather's words. No tact, no subtlety ... Nothing good about me at all, she thought bitterly.

'See you on Monday, Rob.'

'Not at the dance tonight?'

'I don't know. I doubt it. Anyway, have a good time, you and Ann.'

'We will,' Rob said, 'we will.' He rang off.

It took two hours of mental struggle before Katrine went upstairs to her bedroom to find suitable clothes to wear at the Charton House dance. There might, just might, be another way to tackle the problem of the school, the problem of the man who stood in the way of victory. Her grandfather's words earlier that day had forced her to look inwards at her own personality, and being as honest as she was blunt, she faced the worst side of herself without flinching.

Like her father, her grandfather kept saying, and her father was, always had been a difficult man to live with, deal with, even—although it hurt to admit it—difficult at times to love. Being so like him, was she then difficult to 'love'?

Did her grandfather's toleration of her in his house stem purely from a sense of family obligation, and not from affection? It pained her deeply to think that this might be the case, because she loved her grandfather. He was not a 'difficult' man. He was warm and kindly and understanding. No, her father hadn't taken very much after him. Which meant that she didn't either, which also meant that she wasn't warm and kindly and understanding ...

At this point, she had clapped her hands over her ears to stop herself hearing her own thoughts. She would change her personality, here and now she would change it, and it would stay changed. But what about the campaign? She couldn't desert it, not now, not when she had involved herself with it as deeply as she had. Besides, it went against the grain to give up fighting for something about which she felt so strongly.

It was against her nature to crumple at the first sign of failure. We learn by our mistakes—wasn't that something she was always telling the children? She had made mistakes, as her grandfather had said, she had used the wrong tactics. There was no need to abandon the cause, only to alter the manner of achieving the goal.

And this, she thought, looking at her reflection, was one way of doing so. Her skirt was dark tan in colour, her long-sleeved cream silk shirt-blouse rich with embroidery. It had been an extravagance she had allowed herself a few months before. Round her neck she clasped a chunky gilt necklace. After a thorough brushing, her hair shone red-gold.

She did not know how Lex Moran would receive her. After the lashing his tongue had given her over the phone, the very thought of putting a foot inside his house made her uneasy. As she pulled on her coat, she paused, asking herself why she was going, anyway. To admit how wrong she had been to attempt to deprive the children of their pleasure? Or was it to show him that there was a softer, warmer side to her nature, one that was likable, even—lovable?

As she walked down the long drive, his house became a fortress she had to storm, his door a fearsome barrier she must first break down. He was the dragon whom she had not just to pass, dodging his fiery breath and unsheathed claws, but to face, to confront—and to tame.

And what were the weapons at her disposal? A smile, two grey-green eyes, no longer defiant and challenging, but melting and submissive? Her femininity and a shapeliness which had in the past so caught his eye that he even told her once that he was not fancy-free because he 'fancied' her? As weapons, they were poor enough against a man such as he, probably as effective as a spent revolver, a bow without arrows, a sword wedged in its sheath.

As she lifted the heavy iron knocker and let it fall against the solid wooden door, she hoped desperately that it would be Mrs McBride who appeared on the other side. It seemed that the dance had already begun, as music drifted through opened windows.

It was Lara Holland who opened the door, letting it swing wide. Her gown was long, green and clinging, fair hair touching her shoulders. She stared coolly at Katrine and called over her shoulder, 'It's the schoolteacher, Lex. Shall I let her in?' She smiled spitefully at Katrine, keeping her waiting outside. 'You did tell me that if she dared to put her nose inside your door, you'd throw her out.'

Lex Moran strolled, hand in pocket, to Lara's side. His narrowed eyes, his tightened lips turned him into the dragon Katrine had dreaded. Would he produce a three-pronged fork and drive her from his lair? With his head he motioned Lara away.

'I'll deal with this.' 'This', Katrine thought, miserably, not 'her'. As if she were an object, not a woman.

'M-may I come in?' Lex did not answer, leaning sideways against the door frame, both hands pocketed now. A close scrutiny of her person was his only reply. 'I—I understood that everyone was welcome at your annual dance,' she faltered.

Eyes granite hard, lids half-lowered, he said, 'Now I wonder who gave you that idea?' She had no answer. He baited, 'Why have you come—to poison the party spirit? To address a captive audience maybe, on the evil ways of their host, how he deprives the little village children of their rights to attend their very own village school?' His eyes lifted to her hair, which shone in the light over the entrance door. 'Where are the heartrending banners, with 'Save Our School" splashed across them? Not to mention "Down with Lex Moran" and "Grind the Education Committee chairman into the dust".'

People drifted across the entrance hall behind him, people Katrine recognised and who recognised her, who looked with curiosity at the way their host seemed to be keeping at bay an apparently unwanted guest.

Lex said, his mocking manner falling away, 'You've got the cheek to present yourself on my doorstep, with the intention of drinking my wine and eating my food, after what you did to stop the kids coming to the party?'

She pressed together her trembling lips. 'I've come to say I'm s-sorry,' she whispered. 'I can see now how stupid it was, that it wouldn't have achieved anything.' Still Lex did not move. There was a long pause, filled with an unrelenting lack of welcome on his part and a shivering uncertainty on hers.

'Look,' she said, 'I've said I'm sorry.'

'All right, so you're sorry.'

Was he really turning her away without a qualm, was he really humiliating her in front of so many of her friends and allies to the extent of refusing her admission into his house?

In her humiliation her lips parted, revealing their trembling state to his cold eyes. The tears spilled over, splashing on to her gold-sequined evening bag. She swung round to run down the steps, but Lex must have anticipated the attempt at flight because he was after her before she had gone more than a few steps. Her wrist was in his grasp and she was pulled into his house and the door closed.

'Come to the dance,' he said curtly, 'but stay out of my way. Is that clear?' When she nodded slowly, he added, 'Coats upstairs. Use the bathroom if you want.'

He threw her wrist from him and left her.

Five minutes later Katrine found her way, by following the sound of the music and clamour of voices, to the part of the house where the guests were being entertained. The room was long, wide and magnificent. The floorboards over which the dancers moved shone with a high polish, reflecting the brilliance of the crystal chandeliers.

It could, two hundred years before, have been a great, formal dining-room. It might have been called the drawing-room or even the salon. Whatever it might once have been, there was no doubt that Lex Moran had spared no effort in retaining all he could of the magnificence of the past. The ceiling was still elaborately carved and gilded. The marble fireplace was still overhung by a wide, high-stretching, gilt-framed mirror. There were tapestries adorning the walls and all around were paintings of members of a family which had long ago passed into history.

No wonder the people of the village did their utmost to attend the annual dance at Charton House! No wonder they forgot their quarrel with the owner when the day of the children's party arrived, a party followed traditionally by a dance for the adults.

As Katrine stood uncertainly in the doorway, Lex Moran lifted expressionless eyes from the group of people to whom he was talking. One, Katrine noticed unhappily, was Lara Holland.

Even though Lex must have seen her nervousness and uncertainty, he did nothing to help her. Instead, he ignored her predicament and continued with his conversation. To Katrine's immense relief, Jim Rayburn approached, hand outstretched. 'You're looking good,' was his comment. 'Come and join our friends.' He linked his hand with hers and walked with her.

Lex Moran's eyes followed their progress. Katrine was so pleased that she was no longer alone, she told herself she did not care that his eyes had narrowed as if contemptuous of the fact that the young man who had come so gallantly to her rescue was not yet out of his teens.

Jim put a drink into Katrine's hand and she found herself among friends. But, as she stood sipping her drink, she thought. Am I really among friends? Look how they're all waving across the room to each other, spotting familiar faces. Many years would have to pass—she acknowledged the truth her mind had flashed like a print-out—before she was truly accepted into such a tight-knit community into which this—and any village—had evolved over the passing decades.

Even her grandfather, who had lived in the village for twenty years, was only just beginning to be accepted as 'belonging'. How, therefore, could she really have expected them to withstand their children's pleas, and Lex Moran's determination, and keep their children away from the party? How could she have expected them to refuse to attend the annual dance in the beautiful Charton House?

'Dance with me, Katrine?' Rob Bowes had come across the room, leaving a smiling Ann patiently awaiting his return.

Anything, she thought, to dispel the depression and loneliness which had taken her so much by surprise.

'Taking pity?' Katrine asked, putting down her glass and walking with Rob to the dancing area.

'You looked so miserable. You're supposed to be enjoying yourself.'

Enjoying myself, she thought, when the man to whom her heart had wandered and to whom it had attached itself like a stray dog finding a welcoming family and a rug in front of a blazing fire was regarding her with a remote and frigid stare?

No 'blazing fire' there, no welcoming arms, no stroking, soothing hands saying, 'You've come home. This is your journey's end.'

Rob followed where her eyes had lingered. 'Lara Holland's well away with her attentive companion,' he commented. 'Lara and Lex. Even their names go well together.'

'Think they're serious?' Katrine forced herself to ask.

'Who knows, these days? People drift into relationships and out of them.' They danced silently for a while. 'I'm told there was a woman some time back who meant something in his life. Again, nothing permanent, it seems. But you know how people talk.'

As they moved towards the four-piece band, the music ended and Katrine said, with a smile, 'Thanks, Rob, and thanks to Ann for lending me her partner.' She smiled at Ann Tulley and waved to her.

Leading her back to the group she had left, Rob said, 'At least there's a happier look on your face now.' He squeezed her elbow. 'Cheer up, Katrine. All is not yet lost. Jim,' they had reached the group, 'keep the smile on this girl's face. I think she believes the battle's over and the powers-that-be have won.' He left them and returned to Ann's side.

'Expecting a partner?' Jim asked. When Katrine shook her head, he said, 'Nor am I. We'll stay together for the rest of the evening. Okay by you?' Katrine nodded. 'Then let's dance.' As they moved round, Jim murmured, 'Rob's right. The battle's still on.'

Katrine's eyes skimmed round the room. 'To me it looks like a full-scale capitulation, as though everyone's given in. Look,' she said, jerking her eyes from those of Lex Moran's, 'at the smug expression on the face of the chairman of the Education Committee.'

'M'm,' said Jim, 'I wouldn't call it smugness. He seems annoyed about something. But let's forget him.' He glanced down at her. 'You look great, do you know that?'

'Jim, spare my blushes! Anyway, you're far too young even to have noticed how I look. You're only eighteen...'

'Nineteen, please.' He looked pained. 'Approaching twenty. And for your information, it's a good many years flow since I noticed the vital difference between girls and boys.'

She laughed up at him. 'Sorry. Didn't mean to insult your manhood.'

'Thanks for that,' he responded dryly. 'The fact remains that you look good, great, stunning and absolutely beautiful.' As she laughed again, he said with a mock frown, 'You don't believe me, do you?'

Her head moved from side to side, swinging her shoulder-length red-gold hair. 'My grandfather gave me a very bad verbal reference this afternoon. He said I was stubborn, tactless, and—oh yes, unlovable.'

He held her away as they continued to dance. 'Your grandfather said all that? He must have been joking.'

'He was deadly serious. And the worst of it is, he was right.'

'So what?' commented Jim. 'A man can put up with all those things in a woman as long as she's beautiful, got all the usual things in all the right places--'

The music stopped, but Jim held on to her until a frigid voice said, 'If I may, Jim?'

Too startled and embarrassed to do anything but release his partner and step backwards, Jim said, 'See you, Katrine,' and walked away.

Katrine's indignation rose with the swiftness of milk boiling over. 'No, thanks, Mr Moran. I came to your dance to enjoy myself, not to perform duty dances with a reluctant host.'

Her grandfather's voice sounded so loudly in her brain it was as if he were in the room. *Play your cards right. In some situations, it's better to use a delicate touch. You do miss a few tricks ...*

Lex looked down at her and not a word passed his lips. Lips that were set but even so possessed a sensual fullness. Eyes that were- steel-hard and unflinching. A jaw that was square with a deep-clefted chin which told of obstinacy and resolution.

She recalled her thoughts as she had dressed for the dance, acknowledging that she had made her mistakes. No need to abandon the campaign, she had told herself, *only to alter the manner of achieving the goal.*

When the music began, he still did not move. He stood, hands at his sides, and he and she alone were unmoving among the circling dancers. Even now she could not bring herself to ask him to dance with her, but she had to do something.

Her arms lifted slowly, hesitantly, and it was as if she were opening out to give him welcome, pleading, Take me in you arms. I'm ready to go with you, round the room, to heaven or hell, wherever you choose to take me.

She smiled and, seeming satisfied with her apparent surrender, Lex moved towards her. As his arms went round her, even though his hold on her was conventional and broke no established rules, her body came pulsatingly to life. His shoulder beneath her hand was hard and dependable. His back beneath her outspread fingers was broad and solid as a wall. As they moved she felt his muscles ripple.

The chandeliers grew brighter beneath her dazzled eyes, the colours of other women's dresses intensified. The velvet draperies across the windows glowed with an even deeper richness. The mirror's reflection as they drew near it revealed a world even more beautiful than the reality of the laughing, animated images they captured and embellished.

The moment was pure magic—a magic which came hurtling to earth as he hit it with a sure and ruthless aim. 'With Rob Bowes ensnared by an efficient but extremely pretty young headmistress, was a teenage boy the best you could manage to put in his place?'

All her plans for a change of 'tactics', her determination to change her approach, to be more likable, more *lovable*, were scattered to the winds. She took a breath, opened her mouth—and snapped it shut again. She could not—did not want to—quarrel yet again with Lex Moran.

'What,' he persisted, with a smile, seemingly intent on provoking her, 'no sharp-tongued retort, no acid comment?'

'You're my host, I'm-your guest. Guests and hosts should be nice to each other, even if their niceness only lasts while said guest is under said host's roof.'

He laughed. 'Now I know the way to make you stay submissive—keep you under my roof!'

'Anyway,' Katrine returned to his taunt, 'even if I did dance with him, what of it? He's nearly twenty, I'm nearly twenty-four. Four years difference, that's all. Anyway,' she slanted a glance at him, 'with the only attractive man in the house out of my reach—he told me distinctly to keep out of his way—what else was I to do?'

Lex's laugh rang out and other guests stared, unable to believe that the two arch-enemies known as Katrine Hume and Lex Moran were not only dancing, but laughing, together.

'I must tell you to get out of my hair more often. It brings out the wit in you.'

'If you tell me to get out of your hair once more, Mr Moran,' she murmured between her teeth, 'I'll *pull* it out!'

Lex laughed again and manoeuvred her until their bodies made contact. 'So you've been taking lessons in "How to be nice to your man", have you?'

'No,' she smiled up at him sweetly, secretly rejoicing in the feel of him against her, 'how to be pleasant to your enemy. That way, you can get everything you want from him.'

A fleeting hardness forked across his eyes, but it was gone so fast she told herself it had been her imagination. He gazed down at her, eyes brooding. 'There are—er—other ways of getting everything you want from a man.'

For a moment her tongue was silenced, but not her heart. It beat faster than the exciting rhythm of the music to which they moved. Frequently their bodies touched, hips, thighs, legs. Katrine, glancing up, surprised an enigmatic smile on Lex's face as if he were remembering the time he had held her in his arms, kissed her, caressed her.

The music changed and became romantic and it touched secret sensations deep inside her. A feeling of longing tore at her chest, a profound yearning to be held in this man's arms for ever, to become one with him, to yield to him in any way he might wish. Her eyes closed and she began to hum to the music.

'Katrine?' She opened her eyes to see that the lights had been lowered. 'You know the words of this song?' She nodded. 'Sing them to me.' She shook her head. They were too intimate, too appropriate to her feelings for him even to think them. 'I know them, too,' he murmured, 'but I want to hear them from you.'

It took a few moments to find the courage to comply with his wish, and when at last she did, the words came out as a singing whisper.

' "Do not leave me here alone to sigh,"' she sang. ' "Do not leave me here alone to cry. What would life matter if you said goodbye? My heart would fade and die..."' His cheek found hers, and the dancing, laughing world-around them receded. There was no one else, just the two of them drifting away on a cloud ... A kiss feathered her cheek, resting fleetingly on her lips.

'Lex,' she whispered, her eyes glowing in the half- light, 'people will see.'

'Do you care?' She shook her head. 'Nor do I.'

'Lara?'

A slight smile played around his mouth. 'I've had a surfeit of her kisses. My sweet, yours are wine. Hers are water. Is that answer enough?'

Was it? Not really, because he had implied a close relationship with the girl who was in reality her rival. *In reality?* How foolish could she get? In her dreams! In reality, she had no rival, because she meant nothing, nothing at all to this man.

'It will have to be, won't it?' she replied to his question.

He frowned. 'Explain your meaning.'

She said, her eyes glinting impishly 'You want me to tell you I'm jealous, don't you? Well,' she flashed, 'I'm not.'

His smile turned enigmatic again. 'Little liar,' he whispered.

Indignantly she answered back, 'I am not! Do you really think so much of yourself that you consider that *every* woman must fall under your spell?'

'So,' his eyes twinkled, 'you admit I cast a "spell"?''

'No, I--!' The pressure of his mouth on hers effectively stopped her. When his lips released hers, she could only gaze up at him, eyes wide, hands clinging, going wherever he guided her, her footsteps matching his exactly.

He smiled. 'Why are you flirting with me, Katrine Hume? To spite your straying boy-friend, Rob Bowes?' He looked across the room. 'He's well away with his new-found lady love, isn't he? Are you sorry? Do you weep your heart into your pillow every night because of his desertion to another woman?'

Her footsteps slowed to a standstill. 'Let's get things straight, Mr Moran, in the order in which you mentioned them. First, I'm not flirting with you--'

An eyebrow lifted. 'No?' They began to dance again.

'No! Secondly, Rob did not "stray". There never was anything serious between us. He knew my views on marriage right from the start.'

'Ah, yes,' Lex interrupted, 'I have in my arms a lady who's prepared to live with a man without having first taken part in. a marriage ceremony with him--'

'I never said that! Thirdly, yes she *is* his lady love, and no, I'm not sorry, I'm delighted. And finally, no, I don't weep for him every night or any night.' She looked away. 'I don't weep for any man.'

There was such a long silence, her eyes crept slowly back to seek his, only to find them looking intently down at her. 'What does your grandfather usually do on Sundays?'

She frowned at the question, but answered, 'In the morning, he potters about the house and garden. The afternoon and evening he spends going the rounds of his friends' houses.'

'So you're alone. Will you spend that time with me tomorrow?'

Colour crowded into her cheeks and she missed her step, almost tripping over him. His arms tightened round her, preventing her from falling. 'With you?' she asked dazedly.

'If you prefer, I'll invite Lara, too.' He smiled dryly.

'No, thank you!'

'So she's jealous after all.'

'No, I'm not, I tell you. And,' she smiled up into his face as the music slowed to a stop and the lights came up, 'yes, I will, thank you. It's very kind of you to invite me.'

His eyes dropped to her swelling shape beneath the silk blouse. 'There's no "kindness" in my thoughts at this precise moment. Miss Hume.'

She grinned, conscious of the dancers around them dispersing to their seats. 'Don't tell me,' she whispered, 'you fancy me!'

'You're so very right, Miss Hume. Do you, by any chance, fancy me?'

She looked him over with mock-contempt. '-Not particularly,' she replied. 'I've seen better specimens of manhood!'

He gritted his teeth in an anger that was part pretence, part real. 'Why, you little--'

Katrine eluded his reaching hand. 'Thank you for the dance. You've done your duty. Now you can return to your lady love. She's giving me looks fit to burn me to a cinder!'

With a provocative flash of the eyes, she left him.

Next morning, Katrine told her grandfather where she would be spending the afternoon and evening. He did not even try to conceal his surprise.

'Consorting with the enemy?'

Katrine flinched. Put that way, it sounded like treachery. 'I'm only trying to follow your advice, Grandfather,' she smiled sweetly, 'and playing my cards with more "finesse".'

He laughed. 'Up to the old tricks of womankind, are you? Playing on a man's susceptibilities? Well, can't say I blame you. A man would have to be blind not to like what he sees when he looks at you.'

'Praise from you, Grandfather, instead of censure?' She put a hand to her head dramatically. 'I simply can't take it!'

He patted her back and said, 'If you get round Mr Moran like you get round your old grandpa, you'll get everything you want.'

As the morning went by, Katrine noticed with some concern that, after her grandfather had finished reading the Sunday newspaper, he did not follow his usual custom and go into the garden to tend his plants. Instead, he picked up an old newspaper and seemed absorbed in it. He had already read it from cover to cover on the day it was delivered, and the fact that he seemed riveted by the old news it contained puzzled her.

When, later, he put up his feet, closed his eyes and immediately dozed, she grew concerned. The rattle of the cups must have awoken him because when she went into the living-room with his coffee, he was awake. He could, however, no longer disguise the fact that he did not feel well.

Katrine tackled him on the subject, but he merely mumbled, 'Throat's sore. Nothing to worry about. If you don't want any help, think I'll stay here a bit.'

'Look, Grandpa, if you're not well, go to bed.'

'Me, go to bed, when I go out visiting my friends every Sunday after lunch? Not likely.' He had tried but failed to introduce a confident note into his voice.

'You're croaking, Grandpa,' Katrine said, standing over him, hands on hips, 'so your throat must be worse than you're pretending. I know why you're pretending, too—so as not to stop me from going to Mr Moran's. Well, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to call him and say I'm sorry, but I can't come.'

Thomas struggled to his feet and managed to stay on them. 'You're doing no such thing, my girl. Don't you come your father with me! I dealt with him and I'll deal with you.' He groped for a chair and sank down, but his voice remained determined. 'If you stop in, I'll go out, and that's that.'

It seemed that Thomas had passed on something to his son after all—his obstinacy! Which, Katrine thought with wry amusement, must have been where I got it from, too.

'All right. I'll compromise,' she said.

'This should be recorded,' said Thomas with a weak smile. 'My granddaughter is willing to compromise!'

'Well,' she affected a shrug, 'what you told me about my character sank in.' Thomas smiled again. 'I thought I'd better try and do something about what you said.'

'I didn't mean to hurt you, dear.'

'Well, you did, Grandpa, but not for long,' she dismissed the subject. 'Now, what I'll do is tell Mr Moran when I get there that I can't stay long. Only for the afternoon. Honestly, Grandpa,' as he started to remonstrate, 'I wouldn't feel happy and enjoy myself knowing you're here not well.'

Thomas sighed. 'You win, dear. But you always do, don't you?'

Katrine frowned. 'I wish I did. Where the school's concerned," it looks as though I've failed completely. Everyone seems to have deserted me. I'm so confused, I don't know where to turn for help any more.'

'Don't lose heart, dear, just keep on trying and you'll get there in the end.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

As Katrine walked up the hill to Lex's house that afternoon, her grandfather's words came back to her. 'If you get round Mr Moran like you get round your grandpa', he'd said, 'then you'll get everything you want.'

Did Lex think she had accepted his invitation for that purpose only? Then, she asked herself, why had she accepted it? In her heart she knew the answer, but it was an answer he must never be allowed to guess. Better, much better that he should believe she had come to persuade him to change his mind about the school.

Lex greeted her on the doorstep, holding out his left hand and taking her right hand. Thus linked, he pulled her over the threshold and closed the door.

He smiled, saying nothing, but there was no need. The welcome for which she had sought in vain the evening before was in his eyes now, the fire, flickering, if not blazing, was there, too. Was there also that message, 'You've come home. This is your journey's end'? No, that would be asking too much. The fact that he was smiling was sufficient to speed up the already fast-flowing blood through her veins.

Katrine was glad she had dressed in casual clothes. Her jeans matched his, fitting her as closely, except that his tightened over lean, hard hips and hers revealed a shape which was soft and enticingly feminine. Their shirts were short-sleeved, his a dark brown, hers a bright check. Both were opened at the neck, except that beneath his a shading of dark hair was exposed.

He looked her over, then transferred his gaze briefly to his own clothes. 'Snap,' he said, and they laughed.

He led her into his living-room, urging her down on to the settee. He dropped down beside her, half-turned and gave her a long, appraising head-to-sandalled-toe look. Under his scrutiny, Katrine coloured and shifted restlessly, looking away and pushing a finger in the sweet-smelling softness of the upholstered leather arm.

'Whatever you wear,' he commented softly, 'it doesn't conceal the basic tigris in you. You may be playing the bashful kitten now, but--'

Her head swung round. She was about to protest when she saw the smiling provocation in his eyes. He laughed, having produced the reaction he wanted.

'See what I mean?' he taunted, and she smiled ruefully.

'It's me.' She sighed. 'Take it or leave it.'

'I'll take it.*

She had left herself wide open for the remark. Their eyes locked and held for long moments. His eyebrows lifted slowly in a silent question and she was scarcely conscious of the barely perceptible shake of her head.

It seemed the action was sufficient to satisfy him, but she knew him better than to believe he had no intention of asking again. He rose, pulling her with him.

'Come into my garden, my pretty maid.' With his free hand he opened the french windows and they stepped on to the paved area leading down steps to the lawns and flower beds.

They wandered through the rose gardens and Katrine inhaled deeply of the varied scents. Lex's hand held her shoulder, detaining her. He bent down, picked a scarlet rose, removed the thorns and said, 'Come here.'

Reluctant to obey the slightly arrogant tone, yet drawn to him by a feeling even stronger than her willpower, she went as he had commanded.

He lifted her hair away and she tingled as his fingers brushed her ear. 'I should really put it there,' he said, with a smile, 'but,' he let her hair fall, 'I'll put it here instead.'

He found the top button of her shirt, slipped his hand behind it and pushed the stalk of the rose into the buttonhole. It was impossible to hide the

response his touch provoked. It was there in her eyes as they gazed up at him; in the way she had allowed him to slide his hand so intimately into the top of her blouse and let it linger. His hand moved away at last, but slowly as if reluctant to lose contact.

'It's—it's a beautiful rose,' she said huskily.

'Almost as beautiful as the girl wearing it.'

'Now who's flirting?' she challenged with a shy smile, and he laughed with a strange kind of indulgence.

'Let me lead you by the hand.' They wandered, linked by entwined fingers around the gardens, through the woodland and into the extensive orchard.

Katrine touched one or two small apples. 'You'll get a good crop when all these are ripe.'

He nodded. 'Charton House is famous for its succulent brand of apple. People come from many miles around to buy them when they're offered for sale.'

They gazed at the neat, straight rows of fruit trees, stretching into the distance. Lex looked down at her. 'I know what you're thinking. This man is so rich he shouldn't sell his apples, he should give them away. Am I right?'

She laughed and said, deliberately misleading him, 'When did you learn to read my mind?' 'It came to me in a flash,' he joked. 'One look at the lift of-your slightly disapproving nose and I thought, "It can't be the apples she dislikes, so it must be-the way I dispose of them".'

Carelessly she shrugged. All the thoughts he had attributed to her had not even been in her mind, but she forced her voice to sound offhand. 'Since they're not my apples, it's not my concern. It's your business what you do with them.'

It seemed he had accepted her sentiments at face value, because he said dryly, 'I have your permission to do what I like with my own apples. Thanks a lot!'

They returned to the lawn where Mrs McBride served them with tea. She carried out a picnic table and lowered on to it the tray of crockery, teapot and small, mouth-watering cakes. With a smile, she left them.

'How long,' Lex mused, watching Katrine pour, 'is this harmony between us going to last, I wonder?' He took his cup then with his free hand caught at her chin, turning her face towards him. 'There must be a catch somewhere.'

There was a serious look in his eyes, and Katrine, afraid that he would reach with that probing gaze down to the very sea-bed of her emotions, lowered her eyelids.

'Ah, she's closed her eyes, so there is a catch.'

No catch, she wanted to cry. I'm here because I want to be near the man I love, and you're that man, that's all. He threw her chin from him and sipped his tea, staring abstractedly into the distance. It seemed her guess that Lex might think she had come only to 'get round him' had been correct.

They talked of the house, the maintenance of the estate, general conversation that neither drew them together, nor set them apart. When Mrs McBride came to collect the tea things, she commented on how chill the air had grown. Lex agreed and folded the picnic table, carrying it towards the house. He invited Katrine to follow.

In the living-room, he motioned towards the settee and once again joined her there. He crossed his long legs and folded his arms, while his head sank back. In profile his face appeared to be cast in an even harder mould. The ridged jawline was tough and jutting, the black hair thicker, inviting loving fingers to rake it. The brow, the set of the lips more formidable. Casting her mind back, Katrine wondered with astonishment just how she came to be sitting beside such a man on this bright summer Sunday afternoon.

'Lex?'

His eyes flicked open, his head came slowly round, a taunting smile hovered. 'Say that again.' When she frowned, he said, 'Say my name, but this time not as if you were a scared mouse and I a dog about to leap.'

'Lex.' His broad smile revealed his approval. 'I can't stay the evening.' His expression changed and he seemed put out. She added hurriedly, 'My grandfather wasn't feeling well this morning. I nearly didn't come at all, but he insisted.'

'Fair enough,' he said, after a long pause. 'I hope it's nothing serious?'

Sore throat, she told him, probably a cold coming on. He nodded and returned to his former position. His closed eyes began to irritate. If they weren't going to talk, why had he invited her?

Out of the blue he asked, 'Tell me some reasons why you think the village school should be saved.'

Her brain reeled, then righted itself. He had so nearly knocked her off balance. 'I've told you. I told you when you brought me here that day Andy Brown hit m£.'

'Tell me some more.'

'It's not a fairy story,' she snapped.

His head came round, his eyes were cool and she almost shivered in the lowered temperature. 'That remark was uncalled-for.'

She was duly crushed, as he had no doubt intended. 'Sorry,' she mumbled. 'It was a momentary reversion to—my old ways.'

He looked puzzled.

'My grandfather told me some home truths about myself. It hurt to hear them, but coming from him, I knew they must be true.' Into the silence, she went on, 'He said I was—was heavy-handed, unperceptive, indiscreet.' Her

companion listened, his face a mask. 'He— he said I was tactless and had no subtlety. He said I didn't play my...'

She stopped aghast at what she had so nearly given away. By her carelessness, she had almost managed to confirm Lex's suspicion that, in order to attain her goal, she had changed her tactics, that her 'good' behaviour today was the result of a cold, calculated decision to be 'pleasant' to the man who could, with a stroke of the pen, close Charton village school for ever.

'Why didn't you finish the sentence? he asked expressionlessly.

'Allright, so you guessed the rest. It's an old saying, isn't it?'

For a long time, he stayed, eyes closed, head back, like a statue. When at last he lifted his head, his movements were decisive, like a man who had found the answer to a problem.

He turned, half-facing her. His smile was a little twisted. 'Play your cards right, Katrine, my sweet,' he said softly, 'and who knows, you might even win the game. But,' he shifted along the settee, away from her instead of nearer as she had expected, 'I shall play the first card.' He lifted an arm, curving it slightly. 'Come to me, Katrine.'

She grew tense and did not move.

'Come, my sweet, I'm giving you an opening.'

It was a trap and she knew it. He held *all* the cards, the ace included. If she stayed, he could—and probably would—use his superior strength. If she ran, she could not hope to get farther than the front door before he pounced.

There was a pain in her hands and she looked down at them in her lap. They were clasped as tightly as a loving couple's last embrace. The moment she released them she would be saying goodbye to the self she had known and respected—all her life. Because—she stole a glance at his face—there was no doubt about it, if she gave in to his demand, she would leave his house a very different person from the one she was now.

If she could somehow put him at a distance, fling insults at him, revive the old acrimony between them, turn him back into the enemy...

But all she could think of to say was, 'Your—your housekeeper. She might come in.'

'My housekeeper is resting. This is the time she likes to do so.'

Now was her chance. The pain in her fingers drove her on. 'You're so kind to your *servants*, aren't you?' She congratulated herself on her contemptuous tone. 'Your name should be preceded by "lord", not "mister". Her heart jerked at the anger growing in his eyes. 'I'm the village teacher which, in feudal terms, makes me one of your vassals, too. Should I address you as "my lord"?' He reached out and caught her arms, forcing apart her hands. He dragged her towards him across the separating gap and seconds later she lay full-length on the settee in his arms. Even so, she refused to submit, but the struggle was unequal and quite in vain. Lex won with ease.

Stimulated by the battle, his eyes glinted, his lips curved. He brought hostilities to an end by the simple trick of bringing his mouth down on to hers. The kiss was swift, hard and contained an element of cruelty.

When he released her, her mouth—and self- respect—felt bruised.

'It didn't last, did it,' he goaded, 'that "better behaviour"? She didn't stay long, did she, the pleasant, smiling girl I let into my house?'

It pained Katrine to hear the sarcasm, but there was no way in which she could convey to him the reasons for her apparent reversion to her old ways. Well, she thought miserably, I've gained my objective. I've made him the 'enemy' again, and what has it achieved?

She was forced, by sheer lack of strength against his superior muscle power, to remain lying across him in his arms. Her head twisted away from the shoulder on which her cheek had rested.

'I wish I'd never come,' she mumbled, acutely embarrassed by the way they were so intimately entangled. 'In fact, I don't know why you invited me.'

'You don't?' he asked in mock-surprise, looking down at the shining hair just below his jaw. 'I thought that last night we were getting along together so well, I decided I would like to—get to know you a little better,. Since it's the kind of "knowing"—for example,' with a broad smile, 'look at the two of us now—which we couldn't do in company

'If that's what you've got in mind--' She struggled fiercely this time, twisting and turning, pulling at the muscle-hard arms which were wrapped pitilessly around her. It was like being caught in the clutches of a grizzly bear. The more she fought, the more her bonds tightened; yet if she quietened down and submitted, she still would not escape the fate that awaited her.

'Sweetheart, you must have known when you agreed to come what I had in mind. You may be innocent—and I believe you are—but you're certainly not ignorant. I've told you before how you affect me, how I want you and--' he lifted her until she rested more comfortably across him, and whispered in her ear, 'I'm going to have you.'

There was no chance to answer, because he kissed her again. His arms gathered her to him, wrapping about her tenderly. Caressing hands moved over her, finding the rose and removing it gently, putting it aside. His seeking touch acknowledged no barriers, finding the satin-softness of the warm, yielding breasts beneath the partly unfastened shirt, following like a connoisseur of sculpture the curving lines of her body.

He made his own rules, and in doing so broke hers, moulding, stroking and arousing her to a pitch of pleasure and response which felled the restraints she had as a small child planted like young trees around her, and which, until now, she had nourished with care all through her life.

He made love to her until her arms wound round his neck and her lips were offered to him for more and more kisses.

'Katrine,' he whispered, looking down into her face as her head lay against his shoulder and her hand was lost inside his half-unbuttoned shirt, 'admit you're mine.'

She turned her face against him. Even now, restraint? lingered, so deep-rooted had they grown over the years.

His fingers gripped her chin and turned her face upwards. 'Tell me,' he urged. His hand slipped to encompass her throat, and his lips, as if they were drawn by a magnet, covered hers again.

When she could speak, she looked into his eyes. There was tenderness there, 'and male demand, and ardour. But she could not persuade herself that all those things added up to anything more than a devouring desire.

She could prevaricate no longer. Honesty was as deep-rooted in her as restraint and she felt her lips forming the words, 'I love you.'

The kiss that followed blotted out all thought, all awareness of her surroundings, all conscious control over her actions. If he had wanted, he could have carried her to his room and taken from her all the love to which she had confessed. Instead, he lifted her and settled her beside him, pulled her head down to his shoulder and placed his arms around her.

Now it was he who was exercising restraint, and she wondered, after the passion they had shared, at his control over his own emotions. He looked down at her, and there was an expression in his eyes that puzzled her.

He said, with tender amusement, 'Well, I'm waiting.'

She frowned. 'For what?'

'The request. "Please, Lex, leave the school alone." ' There was a tense silence. 'Go on,' he whispered, kissing her hair, 'you've got me exactly where you wanted me.'

Yes, she remembered that she had not disputed his supposition that she had come to persuade him to her point of view. He was there waiting, smiling, expecting her to use to her own advantage the new relationship that had evolved between them. She had only to say--

'Lex,' she played with his shirt button, 'I can't do it. I can't talk about everyday things.' She looked up at him, her cheeks pink. 'Not now, not after--' She reached up, enclosing his neck within the curve of her arm. 'Lex,' she whispered, and tried, by stretching upwards, to tell him she wanted to feel his lips on hers again.

'Katrine,' he held her away, looking into her eyes, 'do you want me to go on? To the ultimate conclusion?'

She sighed, shaking her head.

'Right. Then stop enticing me, you witch. You know exactly how you make me feel—I've told you often enough.' He picked up the rose and fixed it into place again. His hand sliding inside her shirt did not feel strange any more. As the back of the fingers rested against the cleft between her breasts, her pulses quickened and she wanted to press his hand to her body.

The rose was in place once again and he withdrew his hand slowly, holding her eyes. 'That,' he said softly, 'will keep us apart. Neither of us would want to crush a beautiful rose out of existence, would we? Now, be still beside me and talk. Convince me, persuade me, sway my opinions in any way you want.'

It took her a few moments to muster her thoughts and form a few coherent sentences. At first she spoke stiltedly, then the words flowed. The arguments, the reasons she gave came from her heart.

'First,' she said, 'there's the familiarity of the place, a building that's been there all their young lives. They were pushed past it in their prams by their mothers, in their-push-chairs by their brothers or sisters, driven past it in the car by their fathers. They've skipped and run past it from the time they could walk.'

A glance at his face told her nothing.

'Their parents attended the school, too, and many of the grandparents. One child told me how some of the grandparents, when children themselves, had

planted trees around the building, and these were now even taller than the school. They've got their roots there, Lex, that's what I'm trying to say.'

He nodded briefly, but his eyes were on the grey stone fireplace.

'Oldness isn't always bad, Lex,' she finished, disconcerted by his lack of response to her pleas. 'Newness doesn't inevitably lead to happiness.'

'Mm,' he said, and it was his only comment. At some time while she had been speaking, he must have withdrawn his arms, because she realised they now sat apart. The look she darted at him told her that the ardent man who had made such passionate love to her had slipped away and his place had been taken by the person she had learned to respect—and fear. Her enemy, the chairman of the Education Committee.

More than anything in the world, she wanted the other man back, the man to whom she had told her love, the man she had allowed, as she had allowed no other man, to caress her so intimately and kiss her with such demanding passion.

'Lex,' she snuggled against him, putting her head on his shoulder, 'why have you never married?'

He did not put his arms round her again, a fact which disappointed her. 'I've never needed to.'

A short pause, then, 'Oh.'

He smiled. 'Why so strained?' He turned her face, fingers strong on her chin. 'As you know by now, my sweet, I'm a normal, virile man. I'm thirty-five. I'm not an untried, teenage boy...'

'If you're referring to Jim Rayburn,' she retorted, 'he's nearly twenty.'

'Ah, yes.' The irony was heavy in his voice. 'These days a nearly-twenty-year-old can be—almost—as experienced as a man in his mid-thirties.' He released her chin. 'Is he? You should know.'

She said irritably, 'I wish you'd stop talking nonsense.'

'I wasn't aware that I was. I thought he'd taken Rob Bowes' place in your life.'

'I *told* you, Rob didn't have a place in my life. I also told you that marriage--'

'Played no part in your future. Yes, I remember now.' The gleam in his eyes made Katrine's heart race. 'Then what am I waiting for? My darling,' he rose and began to pull her by the hand, 'let me lead the way upstairs.'

Katrine jerked her hand away. 'Will you please stop fooling?' She looked appealingly up at him.

He laughed, resumed his seat and this time slipped his arm round her.

'Is—is Lara the woman you love at the moment?'

'Lara? Lara Holland? I don't associate the word "love" with Lara. She's cool and calculating and wants only one thing.'

She did not look at him as she asked, 'And does she—does she get that "thing"?''

He laughed softly. 'Now that would be telling.'

So he would not answer. She continued with her probe. Something drove her on, although it went against her better judgment. 'Have you ever been in love, Lex?'

He grew strangely still. 'Once. Some years ago.' A long pause. 'She was married. Her husband was an invalid. We knew he didn't have many years to live, so I waited.' The silence was so long, Katrine stole a look at him. Eventually he did die.'

Katrine held her breath. 'And--?' Had Lex Moran been married before?

'And—she went off and married someone else. Someone with whom she had been having a secret affair.'

'So that was that?'

'No. When her second husband was killed in a car accident, she came crawling back to me, pleading with me to take her back. I told her to get the hell out of my life. When she'd gone, I vowed I'd never trust another woman, that I'd never marry, never form any ties with any woman in any way that I wouldn't then be able to get up and go whenever I pleased. That way I could say goodbye, close the door and never return.'

And she had told this man that she loved him! If only she could take the words back.

He took her breath away by coming alive, leaning over her, easing her gently back. 'Until I met a girl with golden red hair and a spirit to match, with eyes as wide and deep as the ocean, with a tongue as blunt and honest and hard-hitting as the proverbial sledgehammer,' she laughed up into his face, 'and who because of her fine principles couldn't be unfaithful or false to any man. You, my darling, my kitten, my Katrine.'

He smoothed back her hair with an ungentle hand, fixed his fingers around her jaw and lowered his mouth to hers. He forced her lips apart and drank of the sweetness within, possessive now, demanding a response which the girl beneath his hard, lean body willingly gave.

When he caressed her breasts she moved against him with joy, wanting to show him in every possible way how much she loved him, how everything about her was his if he cared to take it. He kissed her throat, touched his lips to her shoulder where her shirt had slipped away, letting his mouth wander to the cleft between her breasts as if it had every right to be there. Then he turned his cheek and lowered it to where his mouth had lingered.

Katrine pressed him against her, and when he lifted his head she saw the brilliance of the ardour shining out of his eyes. Out of nothing his words rang in her ears. *That way I could say goodbye, close the door and never return.*

'Lex,' she whispered urgently, quoting the song she had sung to him, ' "if you said goodbye, my heart would fade and die." '

He moved away, returning to his former position beside her. He felt for her hand and became still. As the moments ticked by his grip tightened until her hand felt crushed, but it was a pain that she revelled in, because she knew intuitively that it was a pain he too was feeling. She supposed it would maybe take years of a happy, stable relationship to erase from his mind the hurt he had experienced at the hands of the faithless, fickle woman about whom he had spoken.

With her free hand she fumbled with her shirt buttons. When he noticed her failure to fasten them, he released her hand and leaned over to button them himself. She smiled her thanks, still too full of emotion to speak.

He picked up her wrist, and she shivered yet again under his touch. He showed her the time on her watch. She exclaimed, 'My grandfather! I must go. Lex.'

He stood and held out his hand. She placed hers in his and he hauled her up. 'It's as well,' he whispered, kissing her ear, 'in the circumstances, it's just as well.. He led her to the door. 'I'll take you.' Katrine protested that there was no need, but he silenced her with a swift kiss.

Mrs McBride, on her way downstairs, stared unbelievably.

'I'll be back for a meal,' Lex told her. 'Alone. Miss Hume has to go home. Her grandfather's not well.'

The housekeeper expressed her sympathy and hoped Mr Hume would soon be better.

Outside Thomas's house, as Katrine turned to thank Lex for bringing her, she saw he was preparing to get out of the car. 'There's no need--' she began, but he was not listening.

As Katrine opened the front door, she called out to her grandfather.

'I'm in bed, dear,' he answered. 'Legs felt a bit queer. Think it must be 'flu.'

Katrine turned to Lex. 'You mustn't catch it. You must go.' But Lex indicated with his hand that she should precede him up the stairs.

Together they entered Thomas's bedroom and Katrine began to apologise for the untidiness. 'Forget it,' Lex said briefly, and Katrine was filled with relief that he was no snob, despite his wealth and social standing.

Lex, greeted Thomas, who looked startled to have a visitor, and such a distinguished one. The bed creaked under Lex's weight and he said, 'Well, Katrine's grandfather, of whom she thinks so much, what have you done to yourself?'

Thomas made a face. 'It's what some darned virus has done to me,' he retorted with reasonable good humour, considering how he felt. 'Pity they can't exterminate them. They're a pest to the human race.' Pale and lifeless though he was, he did not miss the bright eyes and radiant looks of his granddaughter, nor was his mind so dulled that he was not able to trace the source of her happiness.

He frowned, scratched his head, then shook it, but asked no questions.

Lex reached out, caught Katrine's hand and pulled her to stand by him. 'Thomas, your granddaughter and I are enemies no longer.'

Thomas's white face turned pink, his tired eyes found new life. 'The school?' he asked eagerly. 'She's persuaded you to save it? I knew it! I told her if she could get round you like she got round me she'd get everything she wanted.'

There was fear in Katrine's eyes as she searched those of their visitor. His gave nothing away even though they held hers unwaveringly, He could not possibly have missed her apprehension. It frightened her to think of what he would make of that fear, not to mention her grandfather's words—words which were, in fact, entirely innocent, but which could, if the listener wished, be interpreted as evidence against her.

To her relief, Lex smiled. His hand did not drop hers. If suspicion or mistrust had been in his face, then she had not seen it, and she knew the face of the man she loved well enough by now to interpret every mood it registered.

'No, Grandfather, no, that wasn't what Lex meant,' she told him hastily. 'He meant--' She took a sharp breath. What had he meant? She had told of her love for him, but not by so much as a look or a word had he given away whatever, if anything, he felt for her.

Desire, the male drive to make love, to subjugate and conquer—all these he had shown, but they did not add up to the three simple but overwhelmingly wished-for words, 'I love you'.

'He meant,' said Lex, and in a flash she was on his knee, 'this.' His hand behind her head impelled her mouth towards his and he took a kiss. 'We're friends, very good friends.'

'Friends?' asked Thomas, his voice wavering a little. He looked bemused, as if he were wondering whether he had a fever.

'*Good* friends, Thomas. You get my meaning.' Lex's arm was firmly around Katrine's waist.

Thomas nodded. 'I get your meaning—I think...'

Lex laughed and put Katrine from him. His hand came out and Katrine took it. 'See me out?'

Katrine nodded. 'Won't be long, Grandpa.'

In the hall, Lex took her in his arms. 'When can I see you again, my sweet?'

Katrine rested her head against his chest and sighed with contentment. 'Whenever you want. Tomorrow evening?'

He shook his head regretfully. 'Tied up at a meeting.'

'Next evening, then?' she asked shyly.

He held her away. 'Is that what you'd like?' She nodded. 'You're playing with fire, Katrine. And fire not only burns, my love, it sears, it consumes, it envelops almost everything within its path.'

She. nodded, then shook her head. He laughed. 'You're so confused you don't know what to think, do you?'

Her eyes met his frankly. 'No, I don't.'

'Well,' he pulled her against him, 'we shall see.'

The doubt which she had tried all afternoon to push to the back of her mind groped its way to the light. Fear, apprehension, foreboding, nagged at her.

We shall see, he had said. What would they see?

When he had gone, the imprint of his final, lingering kiss stayed on her lips for hours. As she slipped into sleep that night, she pressed her fingers where his lips had been, and took his kiss into her dreams.

On Monday morning Andy Brown put up his hand. 'I'm sorry, miss, for going to the party.'

Katrine frowned. The party? Of course, Lex's party. So much had happened since then... 'So am I, miss,' a small girl said. 'And me,' came a chorus of voices. Katrine shook her head. 'It doesn't matter any more. It's in the past so--'

'But we let you down, miss,' one of the boys persisted. 'They'll close the school now won't they?'

She remembered Lex's words the night before. *We shall see*. She recalled the fear she had experienced, wondering what he had meant.

'Because you went to Mr Moran's party?' She sighed. 'I doubt if it made much difference, Billy.' She hoped the children were not perceptive enough

to sense her sadness, her feeling of failure. Her smile lacked conviction. 'I forgive you,' she said, forcing a joking note. Then she became serious. It was only fair to warn them, in case the worst happened. 'I suppose you realise that if the school does close down, you'll all have to get up earlier, rain or shine, winter or summer. You'll have to go to the new school by bus.' The children sat like statues, staring at her. 'I expect you'll feel strange at first at the new school. Your mothers will be here in the village. At breaktime, when you're in the playground, you won't see them walking past on their way to the shops. No more pleasant strolls home with your friends, either, because you'll have to come back by bus, too.'

Now what have I done? Katrine thought. It was plain that some were near to tears. Maybe it would have been better if she had said nothing. Wasn't it better if sometimes people didn't know what to expect?

'Let's get on,' she said briskly, and she saw with relief how quickly their faces cleared.

At lunchtime, Andy Brown ate his sandwiches seated at a table in the hall with a handful of other children. Katrine sat with them, eating her own lunch, conscious of the chatter but not hearing a word. Her thoughts had propelled her forward. It was the following evening and she was with Lex...

She became aware of a child beside her trying to attract her attention. Andy Brown stood clutching his crumpled paper bag. 'Miss,' he whispered, 'we'll do something to help you. Billy and me, we're going to think of something.'

Katrine smiled and gently pushed the child's spectacles back to the bridge of his nose. 'Help me do what, Andy?'

'Save our school, miss.' He touched her arm and ran away.

Katrine smiled. Andy seemed to need to touch her, just to make sure she was solid and real and not just a shadow. Mother-substitute, she thought. Poor little boy. Broken home, broken background, broken dreams...

Katrine spent the evening with her grandfather. He had come downstairs during the day, but had gone to bed early.

All evening she had listened for the ring of the telephone, a ring that never came. Why should it? she asked herself forlornly. Lex had a meeting, hadn't he?

But, her other self argued, meetings don't go on until midnight. At midnight, she gave in and went to bed. In less than twenty-four hours she would be seeing Lex again. She would have to content herself with that.

It was after school next day. In the staff room Katrine ran the comb through her hair. That morning she had brushed it until it shone. Already she was conscious of the throb of her pulses. In four hours' time, the clock on the wall told her, she would be with him again. Only four hours now until she could reassure herself that everything that had passed between Lex and herself at his house on Sunday afternoon had not been just a fleeting dream, but had really happened.

She passed Rob's study, calling out that she was leaving. There was an answering 'Right. See you tomorrow.' As she opened one of the two heavy entrance doors to step outside, a long, shining white Rolls- Royce drew up.

He's come for me! Katrine thought, her heart skipping for joy. He's called for me and we're seeing each other four hours early!

The car door slammed and as she watched the long strides bringing the man towards her, her heart tripped and tumbled over. This was no ardent lover who had counted the minutes until he saw her again, who could not wait to get her back into his arms.

This man's face was white with a terrifying anger, his eyes twenty degrees below freezing, his body angular with a scarcely suppressed brutality. Heaven help the person who's aroused him to this state of fury, Katrine thought, shivering. She moved aside to let him pass, but he bore down on her and pushed her back.

I'm the one, she thought dazedly, I'm the one he's after. What have I done to merit this? Has the Education Committee decided to keep the school open

after all? -Have they listened to our pleas and come to an agreement against their chairman's wishes?

Trembling now, she stood her ground. If that was the reason for this assault, then she would take everything he gave and give it straight back. His hands were fixed in such a bruising grip around her arms she could hardly endure the pain.

'Lex, you're hurting me.' She spoke softly and with restraint.

'Hurting you? By God, if I had my way,' he said through his teeth, 'I'd thrash you until you were senseless! Where's Rob Bowes?' She told him. Dragging her with him, he opened Rob's door.

Rob rose at once, hands resting on the desk. He started to welcome his distinguished visitor, but Lex broke in, 'I want this girl. I'm going to tear her limb from limb. She's gone too far this time!'

'Katrine?' Rob asked, deeply puzzled.

Katrine could only shake her head. 'Unless we've won and Mr Moran has lost.' Her voice rang with a bravado she most certainly did not feel.

He slammed the study door. 'Unless you've won? *Won?* You think that the outrage you've perpetrated some time in the past twenty-four hours has brought you *victory*!'

'Outrage?' Her face was as white as his now. Her cheeks were so cold it felt as if the ice in Lex's eyes had given her frostbite. 'I don't know what you mean.'

He steered her into the staff room and half threw her from him. She staggered backwards and hit the table with her thigh, but her brain was so numb the pain hardly registered.

'Don't know what I mean? Which means you're a consummate liar, as well as a mean, spiteful, malicious little bitch. You know what you've done?' he raged, closing the distance between them. 'You've not only deprived the

people hereabouts of a cheap supply of fruit, but you've robbed the local hospital of its *free* supply, plus the children's home and the old people's home in the town.'

'Supply of w-what?' she stammered.

He took hold of her shoulders and she shrank into herself, but she could not escape the violent shaking he gave her. 'Of apples, *apples*. Don't pretend you don't know.' Her teeth started chattering and she went limp. When, after a few moments her distress got through to him, he stopped shaking her and let her go.

She slumped to the table, missed and dropped to the floor, hands to her head. 'Apples,' she whispered, lifting eyes which only half saw him. 'What happened to them?'

'Still pretending you're ignorant of the fact that my orchard's been plundered, my trees stripped bare, and all the apples, still far from ripe, left lying useless on the ground?'

'Oh no!' she moaned.

'Oh yes,' he gritted.

'I swear I know nothing about it.' She knew he would dismiss her denial with contempt, as indeed he did.

'By heaven, you're a good actress.' Hands on hips, he looked down at her, crumpled at his feet. 'And I called you honest. "Blunt until it hurt," I think I said. But I welcomed that bluntness because I thought that at last I'd found a woman I could trust. Trust a woman?' he sneered. 'Never, never again!'

'Lex,' her despairing upraised eyes held appeal, 'I tell you, I know nothing about it.'

'Then who did it? Who got into my orchard and picked every single apple from every single tree, if not you'? Only the other day I took you there. I saw

your disapproving expression when I told you I sold my produce. I even commented on it, and you didn't contradict my assessment of your thoughts.'

No, Katrine thought miserably, I didn't bother to tell him the thoughts he suspected me of hadn't been in my mind.

'As I remember, you were even devious and hypocritical enough to comment that I'd get a good crop when all the apples were ripe. You said those words, knowing all the time that, if your plans went well, the apples wouldn't be there on the trees to ripen. My God, you must have laughed, you and whoever helped you. You couldn't have managed it all on your own. Who was it?' His eyes narrowed. 'Jim Rayburn, your teenage lover?'

She scrambled to her feet. 'Don't for pity's sake bring Jim into this. He had nothing to do with it!' Oh no, she thought, pressing shaking fingers to her temples, I've as good as condemned myself now.

Of course he picked it up, the clue she had displayed like an unfurled banner in front of his eyes. He said slowly, advancing on her again, 'That's an admission of involvement if there ever was one. So who was it who helped you?'

He looked so furious, she backed away, only to find the table once more blocking her retreat. There was a burst of laughter from children in the street outside, the wail of a crying child.

A child! She remembered. Andy Brown sidling up to her. *We'll do something, miss, Billy and me, we'll think of something to help you.*

Andy Brown, unhappy, unwanted little boy, whom the world had, even in his six and a bit short years of life, treated so badly.

Stricken, Katrine looked up at Lex. Now she knew who had done it. She knew also that Lex Moran must never, ever, learn who the culprit was.

CHAPTER NINE

'So who was it?' Lex repeated.

Katrine leant back against the table, head drooping.

'You, after all?' His voice was a hoarse whisper. She nodded. 'And you told me you loved me, let me kiss you and make passionate love to you, almost let me go the whole way.'

He was beside himself with anger. He moved and his hands were round her throat until she cried out. They moved to her head, grasping her hair, pulling it until her head went back and tears sprang.

Then, taking a deep breath and regaining command of himself, he released her, wiping his hands on his handkerchief as if they had been defiled.

'You're nothing but a cheap, worthless, scheming little bitch! I wish I never had to set eyes on you again!'

He turned and strode from the room. In the village quiet, even the sound of the near-silent Rolls-Royce engine seemed loud.

Katj-ine slumped into the hard, wooden chair, drop ped forward to rest her head on her arms and cried her heart out. Well, she had done one good thing that day. She had protected Andy Brown, and that was all that really mattered.

An hour later Rob, making the last rounds of the school, found her still there, still crying. His hand on her hair startled her, making her lift her head. Her face was ravaged with tears and he said, full of compassion,

'I heard it all. I couldn't help it. Katrine, did you do it?'

She shook her head.

'Then who did, love?'

She swallowed, still sobbing. 'I—I can't tell you, Rob. I can't tell anyone.'

'Jim?'

'Not Jim. Please don't press me. I'll never tell.'

He took her home, watching her walk slowly to Thomas Hume's front door.

Her grandfather was shocked by the state she was in. He was full of concern, wanting to know what had happened, who had been responsible for making her like that, because he'd--

She interrupted, sinking into an armchair, telling him wearily of the accusations Lex Moran had made against her of destroying his apple crop.

'And did you do it, dear?' She was silent. 'You can tell your grandpa, lass. Be honest with me as you always are.'

Her head came up. 'Grandpa, I didn't do it.'

'Did you tell that to Mr Moran?'

'At first. Then—then when he said he didn't believe me, I let him think I did do it.'

'But why, lass, why?' There was no reply. 'Do you know who did it?'

She sighed. 'I have my suspicions. In fact, I'm certain.' Her eyes sought her grandfather's. 'But I'm telling no one. Not a single person. It's a secret that'll die with me.'

Her grandfather allowed himself a small smile. 'That's an awful long time at your age, dear.'

'Even,' she vowed fiercely, 'if I live to be a hundred!' He lowered himself into an armchair, almost as weary as she was now. 'You've lost the school, you know that? Now he thinks you're capable of such a terrible thing, he'll never

forgive you.' She nodded, biting her lips to keep the tears back. Thomas whispered, 'You've lost him, too, Katrine.'

She nodded again, and this time the tears had their way.

That evening, as the sun went down, Katrine wandered along the main street. As she went past the school, she tried to imagine it as it would be when it was closed. The childish shrieks and laughter would have gone, the skipping ropes twirling, the footballs bouncing, the whirling figures let out for air and exercise, the shrill sound of the whistle bringing all movement and noise to a stop. A final stop.

She would have to leave the village, find another job. Her grandfather would be alone again, but he wouldn't mind. He'd lived quite happily before. He had so many friends there would always be someone to care for him if he ever needed help.

A white car approached, the registration number memorised so well she knew it by heart. She had no time to look at the driver, but at his side was a smugly smiling blonde. Lara Holland was back beside Lex Moran. But then had the girl ever been displaced? I told him I loved him, Katrine thought. All he ever told me was that he liked my bluntness and my honesty. Honesty! The irony was so bitter it almost made her choke. The truth was that he had so little faith in her he could accept "without question and without deeper examination her assertion that she had committed such an outrageous act as cold-bloodedly ruining his fruit crop.

She watched his car go past and went slowly on her way.

Jim Rayburn phoned the following evening. 'Come to the pub,' he invited. 'The protest group's having an informal meeting there at eight o'clock.'

It won't do any good, Katrine thought. We're fighting a lost battle now. She agreed, however, to join them.

'Heard about Mr Moran's orchard?' Jim asked, with studied casualness. 'No one knows who did it, or when. Miserable thing to do, wasn't it?'

Andy Brown only wanted to help, she nearly cried out, but stopped herself in time. He rang off and she told her grandfather where she was going.

'You'll be wasting your time, you know that?' Thomas said. Katrine shrugged, then sighed. She had spent so many hours of the day and night sighing. She had tried to think, too, but acknowledged in the end that she was caught in a trap from which she could never escape.

Jim called for her and they walked to the King and Crown. It was a low-beamed old building, with brasses on the walls. Displayed on a long, high shelf were Willow Pattern plates.

The tables at which people sat were low and highly polished and made of dark wood. Beer mats were scattered liberally. Around the walls were long benches covered with cushions. Around a circular table placed centrally a group of people sat contemplating half-empty glasses and tankards.

When they saw Katrine and Jim, they shifted, making room and going through the motions of welcome. They gave the impression of being discouraged and dispirited. One of the men asked what would they have, and went to the bar to give their order. The group consisted mainly of young parents, either the mother or the father from each family.

Katrine thought she could detect a strain in the smiles directed at her, but told herself she was being over-sensitive. Then she realised that the rumour that she had been responsible for the destruction of Lex Moran's apple crop could well have spread.

To those who did not know the truth, she, Katrine, by her apparent act of wanton destruction, had transgressed against them as well as the man they both liked and regarded highly. She was therefore the outsider. They might not, that evening, have intended to make her feel the odd woman out, but by their subdued, slightly stiff acceptance of her presence, they were doing just that.

The drinks arrived and Jim raised his, saying, 'To the eventual success of our efforts. Long live the village school.' There was no doubt about it, Katrine thought miserably as she picked up her glass, there had been quick, furtive

glances at her and a holding back by the others before they, too, drank to the toast.

Jim must also have sensed the faint hostility because his arm settled round Katrine's shoulders. She knew it was no more than a purely protective gesture—he already had a girl-friend in the town—but some of the others seemed surprised and disapproving.

All the time, customers came and went. Whenever the door swung open a draught of cool, fresh air came in, extracting the aroma of cigarettes and alcohol.

'Well,' said Jim. 'Future plans. Got any ideas?'

The others looked gloomily into their beer glasses, ran fingers round the rims and sighed.

'We look,' said Jim, trying to lift their spirits, 'like a gathering of students who've just been told they've failed their final exams.' He braced himself, although his arm remained round Katrine. 'Let's at least try and look like the protesters we are.'

A little shamefaced, his companions straightened, too. Katrine knew what was in their minds, but none of them seemed to have the courage to voice the resentment they harboured against her.

'Let's think,' she said, only speaking in order to support Jim's valiant efforts to revitalise their campaign. 'We could--' She delved into her mind's depths. 'We could picket council meetings--'

'Of the Education Committee, of course,' someone said.

A dozen pairs of eyes came spontaneously to rest on Katrine and she winced.

'We could—er—lobby councillors,' she went on bravely.

'Organise petitions,' Jim joined in.

Their enthusiasm seemed to catch on. 'Get our Member of Parliament's backing,' said one.

'Link up with other groups who are prepared to back us,' offered another.

'Send out press releases,' Katrine suggested.

At last the circle of faces looked brighter, reinvigorated for the fight. We haven't lost yet, they seemed to be thinking.

'The school's still open,' Katrine added, latching on to their change of mood. 'Let's keep up the fight to make it stay that way.'

A young mother at the table nudged her neighbour. As they stared, the others turned. Katrine did not.

Jim whispered in her ear, 'We're being overheard. Every single idea put forward has been listened to by the chairman of the Education Committee.'

Katrine's heart missed a beat. So Lex Moran was in the pub. 'Is he alone?' 'The beautiful, seductive Lara is with him.'

Katrine pulled on her jacket. 'I'm going, Jim.' To the others she said, 'Sorry, must get home. My grandfather's on his own.'

Since her grandfather had, prior to her arrival five months before, spent over two years on his own, her companions did not look convinced by her excuse. She knew deep down what they were thinking. The man against whom, rumour said, she had committed an unforgivable act of vandalism was sitting only a short distance behind her. He was perfectly entitled to take her to court for the damage he thought she had caused. This meant, therefore, that she wanted to get away from his incriminating presence as fast as possible.

'I'll take you,' Jim said. 'Yes, I will,' as Katrine began to protest.

'Bye, all,' said Katrine. 'See you soon. Keep on thinking up ideas.'

On the way out, she had to pass Lex. The attractive blonde who sat possessively beside him—his arm was round her as Jim's had been round her own shoulders —smiled up at Katrine like a cat that had licked the cream jug dry.

Lex was not smiling. His jawline was set, his lips drawn in. But it was the contempt in his eyes that froze Katrine's heart into a miniature iceberg.

As she came level with him, Katrine's eyes involuntarily pleaded, 'Forgive me'. Not a muscle of his face moved in response. Katrine shivered and Jim's arm went around her again.

'Come on, kid,' he murmured. 'The temperature in here's so cold suddenly, I feel I need a few more layers of clothes.'

'We would have to meet him,' Jim grumbled as they walked to Katrine's home.

'How much of our conversation did he pick up, do you think, Jim?'

'Most of it, probably. We didn't keep our voices down because we assumed that everyone there would be in sympathy with our cause. We didn't bank on meeting our Enemy Number One!'

'Do you think he'll use any of it against us?'

Jim made a face. 'Holding what he does against you, most of it, I imagine. Katrine, if it's not too painful a question to ask—did you do it?'

She withdrew her arm from his and said coldly, 'Do you really think I'm capable of doing such a thing?'

In the fading evening light, he coloured slightly. 'Not really. I mean, no, of course not, *not...*'

'I'm glad you've made up your mind.'

'Look, Katrine, don't take offence, *please*. I knew how strongly you felt about the school. I wouldn't have blamed you, even if you had gone to such lengths.'

'Well, I didn't. So now you know for *certain*.'

They were at her grandfather's door. 'Don't be like that, Katrine. I only wanted confirmation. I was sure really that you were innocent.'

'All right.' She relaxed into a smile. 'I forgive you. Even though the others haven't forgiven *me*.'

'I'll tell them.'

'Don't tell a soul, Jim, and I mean that. I've a suspicion who did do it, but I'll never reveal the name. Never. So it's better if they go on believing it was me.'

Jim smiled a little wistfully. 'You're an angel, do you know that? If I hadn't got a girl--'

'But you have. And you know very well, Jim Rayburn, that I am not an angel and never will be.'

On that happier note, they parted.

Thomas was visiting one of his many friends and the house was empty—of people, Katrine thought, as she wandered from room to room, but not of thoughts, and more thoughts. Of tormenting memories, of being in Lex's arms, of his eyes gazing at her with passion and demand...

The rose he had given her still stood, a single bloom, in a silver vase on the mantelpiece, beside a picture of herself as a young child. Out of the window night encroached upon the last of the day's light. Unexpectedly, tears filled her eyes.

Sing the words, he had whispered on the night of the dance. I want to hear you say them...

Do not leave me here alone to sigh, do not leave me here alone to cry! The tears made rivulets down her cheeks and she tasted their salt. *What would life matter if you said goodbye? My heart would fade and die.*

She ran upstairs and pressed her streaming face into her pillow.

'Miss!' There was a tug on her skirt at playtime and Katrine looked down.

Andy Brown's small face, looking like a baby owl with his over-large glasses, smiled up at her. This small boy, she thought, the trouble he's caused me!

'Miss, I want to tell you something.' Katrine went down to his level. 'My mum--' his round cheeks were pink with pleasure, 'my mum's going to have me back. She said my new dad said he wanted me, as well.'

'Oh, Andy!' Katrine's arms went round him. He tolerated them for a moment, then struggled free.

'That baby they had was a little girl and now they want a boy, and that'll be me! I'll have a sister!' As if, Katrine thought, trying to put her own unhappiness behind her, it was the greatest gift in the world.

Well, wasn't it? she asked herself, giving him another quick hug. To be restored to one's family, to regain not only one's mother, but acquire a father, *and* a new sister—what more could a bereft, lonely little boy want? She was doubly glad now she had taken the blame for the destruction of Lex's apple crop.

He whispered near her ear, 'Those apples, miss. I did it, like I said—Billy and me and Billy's big brother. We climbed the fence and got over and picked the apples.'

A lump formed in Katrine's throat at the expectant look on his face—expectant of praise. She had to tell him, as gently as she could, that what they had done was wrong. As she spoke, his face fell.

'We only did it to help you, miss. We went to that party although you said not, so we thought we'd pick the apples instead.' He sought her hand. 'It was for you, miss.' His small face, upturned now Katrine was standing, sought longingly for a word of approval.

In the end she swallowed and said, 'It was very kind of you to try and help me, Andy. I really appreciate that. But don't ever do it again, will you?' Slowly he shook his head. 'And I'm so very pleased to hear about your mummy and new daddy, Andy.'

He nodded, and added, 'And my new sister.'

'Of course, your new sister.'

Joyfully, Andy skipped away.

As she prepared to go home that afternoon, Rob called her into his study.

'I want you to be the first to know, Katrine.' She guessed what was coming, but smiled with anticipation. 'Ann and I—we're going to be married.'

'Rob, I'm delighted, absolutely delighted to hear it.' Their hands met briefly across the table. 'When's the happy day?' 'As soon as we can arrange it. Katrine, there's some- thing else I must tell you.'

Again she knew what was coming and she closed her eyes, feeling her heart take a dive.

'I've known for some time,' she heard him say, 'but I couldn't tell you until things were finalised.'

The closure of the school ... Well, she thought dully, what would it matter to Rob? It would be all right for him. Ann would resign as headmistress of her own school, the one to which the children would be taken every morning in the school bus. Rob would probably be appointed in Ann's place.

'Lex Moran told me to keep it to myself.' She was only half aware of what Rob was saying. 'He said it would save you the trouble of thinking out new

ways of protesting.' It sounded as though Rob was smiling, as if trying to soften the fall of the axe. Of course he could smile. His future was assured.

Rob seemed to recognise that he had only half her attention. 'Remember the day Lex Moran visited the school and brought another man with him? We discussed it then.'

At last she looked up. 'Discussed what?'

'The capacity of the school. The largest number of children we could take.'

'The—the *largest*?'

'The largest intake we could cope with as the building is designed at present.'

Katrine put a hand to her head.

'I did some calculations and told him, taking into account that there were two classrooms standing empty and the two we do use are only half filled. I also pointed out that with an increased intake, we'd need at least two more teachers.'

'Increased intake?' Katrine whispered. 'More teachers?' She put shaking fingers to her cheek. 'Have we won, then? Is the school going to stay open?'

'At last you're with me!' Rob smiled broadly.

'Please explain,' Katrine said hoarsely, unable to still her trembling hands.

'You know Moran owns factories around the country, plus one or two abroad?'

Katrine managed to nod.

'You also probably know that there's been talk of establishing an industrial estate on the outskirts of the village? Well Moran has decided to build a factory there.'

Katrine's cheeks, having been drained of colour, were now a deep pink. 'But—but the planning committee refused to allow the industrial estate to be built there.' Her voice sounded high and excited.

'Lex talked them round, told them he'd employ the best architects available to design the building, which meant it would be good to look at as well as functional. It would bring a new means of solving the unemployment problem in the village. Also, since he would need to import highly skilled labour to man the factory...'

Katrine interrupted excitedly 'So new workers will be needed, which means a lot of them will be married couples—*with children!*'

'Right first time,' smiled Rob.

'So the school has been saved! And by Lex Moran himself!'

'None other,' said Rob, twirling a pencil. 'I—er— wonder why?'

'Don't look at me,' Katrine said. 'Judging by what he said to me when he found out about the apples, I'm not even fit to crawl under his well-shod feet.'

'Ah, glad you've reminded me. Those apples—I know who did it, Katrine.' She raised her head, eyes scared. 'As you said, it wasn't you. It was Andy Brown, plus a couple of others.'

'How do you know?' she whispered.

'It's common knowledge. He's gone around telling all his friends. Said he did it for you.'

'Are you going to do anything about it, Rob? As head teacher, I mean.'

'No. That's up to Moran. They were his apples and it happened outside school hours. But, Katrine, you'll have to tell Moran you're innocent.'

Fiercely she shook her head.

'All right,' his hand reached for the telephone, 'I will.'

Her hand came out to stop him. 'Please, Rob, don't. Not yet, not until Andy's back with his mother and living with his new father and baby sister. He's so happy about being one of a family that if his mother turned against him again, he'd never recover from the shock for the rest of his life.'

Rob frowned. 'Is his mother taking him back?'

Katrine nodded. 'Andy told me yesterday. His stepfather's not only willing but eager.'

'I'm glad about that, at least. But, Katrine, someone's got to put you in the clear where Moran's concerned.'

'What would be the use?' she asked wearily. 'Nothing could heal the breach between us now. I don't mean anything to him any more.'

'But you did once?'

She shrugged and sighed. 'I was beginning to think so. But it seems I was wrong. If a man could say the things to a woman that he said to me--'

'It was a terrible thing to have happened, Katrine. In such circumstances, anyone could be forgiven for calling anyone names whom they suspected as being responsible.'

'You didn't hear what he said, or see how—how he treated me.'

'Then why did he do as much as he did, go to so much trouble and expense to save the school, if not for—well, someone who meant a lot to him?'

Katrine smiled wanly. 'Finding the woman you've been waiting for for years, Rob, seems to have turned you suddenly into a romantic. The real answer to your question is hard finance—a chance to expand, develop his business interests, nothing else.'

Rob still did not seem convinced, but Katrine was too enervated—after her initial elation—to continue the argument. She asked Rob's permission to tell her grandfather, and he gave it readily.

'Lex said that now everything has been finalised, now all the committees concerned have given their approval, the whole world can know.'

'Good.' She smiled, but it was a weak effort.

'Cheer up, Katrine. Things may not be as black as you think.'

'My goodness,' said Katrine, 'Ann really has done you good! You're a confirmed optimist now, instead of the near-pessimist you used to be.'

Rob laughed good-naturedly and as she went from the room settled down to the papers in front of him.

Thomas received the news with bright eyes and slight shaking of the hands. His granddaughter's apparent success staggered him.

He hugged her briefly. 'I've called you some names, dear, haven't I? I've told you how like your dad you are. All the same, he never had your guts and determination, I can tell you that.'

Katrine refused to take all the credit. 'There was a group of us and we all did our share. But, to be honest, I doubt if what we did really had much effect.' Thomas seemed puzzled and she went on, 'It was Mr Moran's business instincts that made him investigate the possibility of building a factory. Nothing we did would make any impression on a man like that.'

Thomas sat down. 'I don't really think you're being fair to him, Katrine. You must give him some credit for possessing humanity and feeling.'

'Must I?' she said dully. She joined her grandfather on the old settee.

For some time they sat thinking their own thoughts, then Thomas said, 'You like him a lot, don't you, dear?'

'What makes you think that, Grandfather?' Her voice was heavy.

'That day I wasn't well and you spent the afternoon with him.'

Katrine stirred restlessly. The memory of those few hours kept recurring, and each time a longing welled up, of wanting Lex's arms about her, his lips on hers.

'I could see by the way he behaved towards you he liked you, too.'

'Liked'. Was that really all it was? Then why had her hopes soared, why had she thought that his loverlike attitude had indicated a deeper feeling?

'I think you should go and thank him for what he's done, dear.'

Katrine stared at Thomas. 'What do you mean, "go and thank him"?''

Her grandfather studied the heavily veined backs of his hands. 'As the leader of the protest group, it's the least you could do, isn't it? I mean, he's put himself to a good deal of trouble to give you and your friends—the village, in fact—what you've all been fighting for.'

'Can't--' She took a breath. 'Can't I phone him and thank him?'

Thomas was now finding of immense interest the ancient pocket watch which he wore on a chain. 'It's not the same as going, is it? When you think what you've done to him—thrown him out of a meeting, and in front of all the people. Interrupted a county committee meeting and made so much noise he had to throw *you* out. Forced your way into his house. And those apples--' He looked at her. 'Who did ruin Mr Moran's orchard, dear? Surely you can tell me now?'

'Only if you promise not to tell. Not yet, anyway.' Mystified, her grandfather agreed. 'Andy Brown,' Thomas's bushy grey eyebrows shot up, 'and Billy and Billy's big brother. But Grandpa, I still want it kept from Mr Moran until—well, Andy's mother takes him back. I don't want anything to go wrong there. You do understand?'

'I understand all right, dear, but what I don't understand is why you let Mr Moran go on thinking it was you.'

'I've just told you why, Grandfather. If Mr Moran takes any action against the boys, including Andy, his stepfather might refuse to have him.'

'So you took the blame for Andy's sake?' Thomas sighed. 'You're either a fool or an angel, lass.' He smiled. 'Both, I think.' He tugged his watch from his top pocket again. 'Six o'clock. You might just catch Mr Moran before he has his evening meal and goes out. That is, if he is going out.'

'Have I really got to go, Grandpa?'

'You've really got to go, dear,' he said in a kind of whisper. 'You're a brave girl. I know you've enough courage to help you face a man you've called your enemy so many times. Now he's turned out to be a friend instead, I think you're made of the stuff that recognises when you've been wrong and isn't afraid to admit it.'

Without bothering to change or tidy herself, Katrine slung her jacket over her shoulder, closed the front door and walked up the hill to Charton House.

CHAPTER TEN

'YES,' said the housekeeper, 'Mr Moran is in. Did you want to see him?'

'Just a few words, Mrs McBride. No, I won't come in, thanks.'

The housekeeper hesitated, plainly disliking leaving a visitor on the doorstep. Deciding she had no other choice, she disappeared inside.

Lex Moran emerged from the hall shadows. 'Come in, please,' he said crisply.

Katrine shook her head. 'What I've got to say will only take a few moments.' Her heart pounded, her mouth felt parched, her brain seemed clouded with a drifting mist.

'On the other hand,' Lex said coldly, 'what I've got to say to you will take some time. So please come in.'

After a brief hesitation, she accepted the inevitable and obeyed reluctantly, following him into his living- room.

'Say your piece,' said Lex, leaning against the back of an armchair.

At his imperious tone the lire within her, having been damped down for so long, began to shoot flames.

'I only came,' she snapped, 'to thank you, so there's no need to be so superior!' The words came out in a rush, like a man hurling himself at a locked door.

His eyebrows crept upwards. 'Thank me for what?'

'You know very well. For—for saving the school. Rob told me what you're planning to do.'

'Let's make this plain.' He turned and leant on folded arms against the top of the chair back. 'I'm a man of business. I did what I did for my own ends. I

saw the financial advantages of building a factory in an area where land is comparatively cheap. Also where housing for the workers I intend to import into the area will be less costly than other places more accessible by road and rail.'

He narrowed his eyes and watched her react to his words. Apparently satisfied with what he saw—her growing indignation, her tight 'I knew it' smile—he went on, speaking with clarity and deliberation, 'I make products which are virtually tailored to individual companies' requirements. They're not mass-produced, therefore fast transport connections were not of major importance as they are in other manufacturing lines.'

As he talked, so the fire inside her flared.

'There now,' he drawled, 'I've said everything you expected me to say. I can see by the look in your eyes.'

'I *told* Rob,' she burst out, 'that that was why you did it! My guess was right. His was wrong.' The moment she had spoken she regretted the words.

'Now tell me what Rob guessed my motive to be.'

'I'm—I'm sorry, I can't. Anyway, he didn't say it, he just implied--'

Lex straightened and came slowly towards her. 'Tell me. *Tell me!*'

He looked hard and threatening and Katrine knew he would not give up until he had received an answer.

'All right.' She swallowed. 'He implied that you might have—have done it for—for someone's sake. I've said "thank you", which is all I intended to do. I'm going.' She swung round, heading for the door, but his hand gripping her shoulder stopped her.

He jerked her round. 'Not so fast, lady! For "someone" read Katrine Hume. Right?' She told herself she should have recognised the danger signs flickering to life in his eyes, but she had been too blinded by the smoke from her own.

'Do you really think I'd do what I did for a cheap little thief? Because make no mistake about it, that's what you are. You robbed me of my precious crop of apples, and not just me. All the kids I would have given them to, the hospital patients whose relatives are too poor to buy luxuries like fruit—that's what I can't forgive you for. To think that you could have stooped to such a mean trick,' his hands gripped both her shoulders now, 'letting me down when I trusted you implicitly. Well, you've soured me for good as far as women are concerned, do you hear?'

The fingers were biting into her flesh so cruelly now she closed her eyes to hide the pain they would betray.

'I experienced a woman's crooked ways once before in my life,' he rasped, 'then you came along with your *honesty* and *frankness*—all a sham! So I'm never going to be taken in again.'

The hands gripping her shook her and she could not bear it. 'You don't know,' she cried out, 'You don't know how wrong you are!'

'Wrong, when the ruined crop is still lying there under the trees?'

Katrine twisted away, got to the door and wrenched it open. As she reached the front door, Mrs McBride appeared. She looked agitated and her hands moved against each other.

'Mr Moran, sir,' she appealed to him as she stood across the hall, 'I couldn't help hearing what you were saying, you talked so loud. I can't let you go on accusing Miss Hume of doing something she simply didn't do. It was Andy, Mr Moran, little Andy Brown and his friend Billy and his brother. It's all over the village. He's been boasting to everyone. And it's true— I checked with Billy and Billy's brother.'

She glanced at Katrine, saw her distress and went on, 'Miss Hume's such a good young lady, sir. You don't know how good. She's been shielding Andy. She's taken all the knocks for his sake.'

Mrs McBride seemed to be waiting for someone to speak. When no one did, she went on, 'I'm sorry for intruding, Mr Moran, but someone had to clear Miss Hume's name. She didn't seem to be doing it for herself.'

There was a long silence. Katrine closed her eyes, resting against the front door. At last Lex Moran spoke.

'Thanks, Mrs McBride. I'm more than grateful.' Katrine felt Lex was looking at her, but she couldn't meet his eyes. 'You've done me a considerable service.' Lex nodded and the housekeeper went away.

'Well now. Miss Katrine Hume,' he said softly. 'Deny all my housekeeper has told me if you can.' She was silent, staring at the floor. 'So you're not even going to try?' Still she did not respond.

Her hand rested on the door handle, but she made no attempt to turn it. Lex came up beside her and lowered his hands to her shoulders. They were gentle now, his thumbs caressing the smooth skin of her neck. 'What am I to do with you, Katrine Hume?'

'D-do all the things you've d-done before. Pick me up and eject me from your home. Abuse me, call me a thief, a liar, say I'm mean and spiteful and malicious. Sh-shake me,' her voice trembled. 'Go on,' she goaded thickly, 'th-throw me out.'

He turned her quickly. His arms went round her and she was crushed against him. 'I said once,' he murmured, 'that the only way to stop Katrine Hume's mouth from uttering nonsense was to do this.' His mouth took hers and he prised her lips apart. From deep inside her a response leapt instantly to meet his demands.

When his head lifted, and her glowing eyes sought his, her body was shaking and she doubted whether, if she tried to walk, her legs would support her. Lex must have doubted it, too, because he swept her up and carried her into his living-room, making for an armchair. He threw out the cushions and drew her down on to his knees. Her head flopped against his shoulder, a sigh escaped her and she was at peace.

'Lex, oh, Lex,' she whispered, and closed her eyes.

He stroked her hair. 'Why—*why*—did you let me think such terrible things of you?' he murmured at last. 'Why did you shield the real culprits?'

She told him again about Andy Brown, about his unhappy life and how all that was in the process of changing. 'I didn't want anything--' Uncertainly she searched his eyes and saw the question there. 'I mean, I didn't know what you might have in mind to do to him and the others if you found out. Like—like...'

'Taking them to court?' She nodded. 'It's what the young vandals deserve.'

'Oh, no, Lex, because, you see,' her arm went spontaneously round his neck, 'Andy told me he did it for me. To help me. Because of going to the party.'

His head went back and to Katrine's immense relief, he laughed. 'So you want them to go unpunished?'

She nodded vigorously. 'I know it's asking a lot for you to let them go, but if anything should happen to turn Andy's stepfather against him--'

'I get it, sweetheart. And I do understand.' He kissed her upturned lips. 'I'm human, like you. I have compassion, like you.' He whispered, 'Just keep on holding me like you are--'

She realised that now both her arms were around his neck and tried to draw away, but his arm pressed her to him.

'So,' Lex went on, 'is what you've told me about the child the reason why you've been especially protective towards the boy in the past?'

'Yes, Lex.'

'Even cuddling him after he'd kicked and punched you?' He smiled gently.

Sighing, because everything was happening as she wanted it, she pushed her arms beneath his jacket and wrapped them about his body. Her head found

his chest and she felt against her cheek the dark hair beneath the thin silk of his shirt.

'Is that what you're doing now?' he asked softly. 'Cuddling me after I've ill-treated you? I've physically hurt you, I've battered you verbally, spoken to you as I have never in my whole life spoken to a woman. Yet here you are, cuddling me! Is it a habit of yours to embrace your opponents, my love?'

His lips left a trail of fire around her face and throat, making her burn and shiver at the same time.

'Only-in selected cases,' she replied, smiling.

He laughed and shifted her to bring her even closer to him, 'Oh, my love, my love,' his voice was strained, 'I thought I had to give you up. You seemed to have let me down so badly I never wanted to touch another woman again. I've loved you——'

Her head came up. '*Loved*, me?'

He pressed her head against him again. 'Loved you,' he repeated firmly, 'from the moment I saw you on that platform in the village hall. Even when you were fighting me fit to tear my eyes out, it made no difference to my feelings for you.'

'Even when I tried to stop the children going to your party?'

'That was of nuisance value only. You challenged me, so I met the challenge and overcame it. When the apple crop was destroyed, I racked my brains to think of anyone else who could have done such a thing, who bore such a grudge against me they could even stoop to that.'

Her head came up again, her eyes sparking. 'You really thought I was capable of doing such a thing?'

'I didn't want to think it was you, but I had to find out. When you nodded after I'd asked you outright if it was you, I crumpled mentally, like a man who had been hit in his most vulnerable part.'

She did not speak, just let her head lower to rest against him again.

'Then just now when Mrs McBride told me the truth--'

'In your eyes I turned from she-devil to angel,' she finished.

He laughed. 'Angel? Rebel, more likely! No angel, my sweet, with your spirit, and that temper of yours, this--' he tugged at the fine strands which were spread across his chest, 'this colour hair.'

His voice sank to a whisper. 'Angel?' He shook his head. 'When we're married—I can't wait long—I don't want to take an 'angel' to bed, my darling. I want a spitfire beside me, a spirited, vibrant woman who brings out my most basic responses. And you, my love,' his eyes gleamed as his desire kindled, 'are that woman.'

He flicked off his tie, threw away his jacket and. moments later, Katrine's jacket joined the growing pile on the floor. As the sun sank, their ardour grew until, reluctantly, Lex checked himself, slowly re-buttoning her blouse.

'Now you know,' he murmured against her neck, 'that it was for you that I went to such lengths to save the village school.'

'For me,' she murmured dreamily, 'but also for the^ villagers and children.'

'I must be honest—yes, also for the village. I'll let' you into a secret. I agreed with you and your friends from the start, but because of the position I held as an elected representative, I couldn't let anyone know. Not even you. After all, you were leading the campaign, weren't you?'

She sat up and said indignantly, 'Yet you threw me out!*

'You broke the rules, my sweet. I had to. And what's more, if I make love to you much longer, I shall be breaking the rules. Not that I would mind--?'

She answered the question in his eyes with a kiss.

'If it weren't for Mrs McBride,' he went on, 'I'd--'

She said 'sh-sh' and put a finger over his lips. 'She could even be listening outside the door. And we couldn't blame her, could we? After all, this is all her doing.'

'I think,' he said, leaning across to switch on a table lamp, 'I've got myself the perfect wife. Unselfish, compassionate, warm and loving, and what's more, possessing a social conscience.'

'Just right for someone in your position,' she laughed. 'The villagers respect you, you know. So much that, even though you seemed to be their enemy about the school, they almost withdrew their friendship from me when they thought I'd committed such a terrible crime against you.' 'You had all that to bear, too? And all because of an unhappy little boy. Tell me, sweetheart,' he tipped up her face, 'do you respect me?'

Katrine nodded. 'But I love you even more,' she said ' slowly, 'much, much more.'

'Show me how much,' he commanded softly.

She reached up to kiss him and was crushed in his arms.