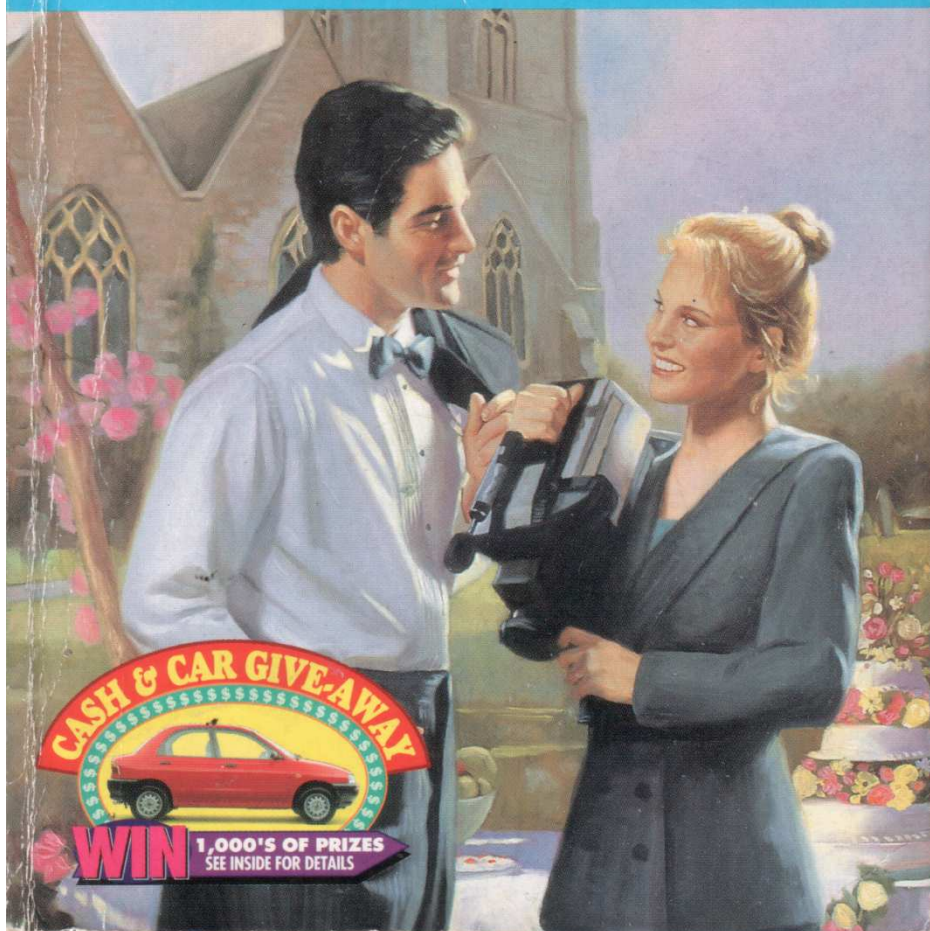


Harlequin Mills & Boon



Marjorie Lewty

MISLEADING ENGAGEMENT



CASH & CAR GIVE-AWAY

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MISLEADING ENAGEMENT

Marjorie Lewty

Very good friends...

Getting a fledgling wedding video business off the ground just when people were buying their own camcorders was not easy, so Anne Grey was pleased to stand in for a friend recording an interview in Cornwall with crime writer Francis Gardiner. It was a shock to discover the writer was really Mark Rayne, the man she had only recently crossed swords with at a wedding!

As they continued to work together, Anne knew that she was falling in love, and meeting Mark's young son, Matthew, was a delight. But Mark thought she was engaged to someone else, and Anne found it almost impossible to tell him the truth..

CHAPTER ONE

'ONE video camera, four cassettes, six batteries, one tripod, off-camera mike and stand, headphones, on-camera light...' Anne counted each item aloud as she arranged them on the worktop in her editing suite—or what she preferred to call the pantry. It had always been the pantry, since she'd been a little girl raiding it for biscuits when she'd got home from school.

She reached down into the cupboard for her holdall and, as usual, her glasses slipped down her nose and fell onto the vinyl-tiled floor. Cursing roundly, she picked them up, examined them for damage and, when reassured, stuck them back on her straight little nose. Roll on contact lenses! She'd promised herself if this wedding job today went well and the clients paid up promptly, to get rid of the hated glasses for ever.

As she finished packing all her gear into the holdall she heard a faint plop in the hall and walked swiftly through the old-fashioned kitchen to the front door, hoping that it was a reply to her advertisement. But it was only the local paper. Picking it up, she carried it to the kitchen table and spread it out at the small ads page. She always checked carefully on her advertisement. There had once been a mistake in the phone number and she had worried about the jobs she might have lost. She looked down the columns. Yes, here it was:

Anne Grey—videos. Weddings, parties, all social occasions captured on video to show in your own home.

Top-class work guaranteed. Artistic presentation.

Moderate fees.

Her phone number—correct!—followed.

Breakfast now. She made coffee and sat down to enjoy a leisurely breakfast of toast and Marmite. The wedding was timed for one o'clock and she planned to be at the church a full hour before the guests started to arrive. She had paid a preliminary visit to the church, which was situated in a village about twenty miles away from her home in a south Warwickshire spa town, to take shots of the architecture and get the vicar's permission to set up her gear inside the church. There were a lot of roadworks going on, and it had taken her nearly an hour to drive there yesterday, but there was plenty of time before she needed to start out today.

She picked up the paper and folded it back at page six, where announcements of forthcoming weddings and social events appeared. This was Anne's happy hunting-ground. At first she had had to nerve herself to approach possible clients direct—it had taken a good deal of courage to ring a doorbell and announce herself and practise what amounted to touting for business—but she found that most people were polite, and some even interested in her sales spiel.

She didn't realise that they were perhaps more interested in the neat young woman herself, with her slender figure, her thick mane of pale gold hair, more often than not scraped back in a bunch at her neck, and her brilliant, dark blue eyes smiling behind glasses which seemed too large for her small face. In time she had conquered her natural diffidence and had picked up several jobs by this method. If she was going to make a success of running her own business she would have to learn to be self-assured—she had soon found that out.

There were no weddings announced for the week to come, but on the next page she found something which interested her even more. Under the heading WEDDING OF THE WEEK appeared a piece about the wedding she was booked to video today.

The wedding of Sir William Brent's daughter, Elizabeth, to Mr Andrew Foulkes of London will take place on Saturday June

9th at St John's Church, Offleigh. The photograph on the left shows the happy young couple at their engagement party last December. Also in the picture is Mr Mark Rayne, who is to be the best man. Mr Rayne is a writer and has recently become engaged to Miss Trudi King, the well-known model, who is seen here with him.

There was more about the reception for two hundred guests, which would be held at Sir William's residence, and about the bridesmaids and the names of some of the important guests, but Anne was studying the photograph.

There would be no difficulty in capturing on tape the radiant happiness of the good-looking young bridal couple. They were standing with their heads together, champagne glasses raised to each other in a toast and obviously sharing some private joke.

But the other couple held Anne's attention. Even in the newspaper photograph it was plain that they were both stunningly attractive. The girl was sitting on a sofa in an elegant posture, her long dark hair flowing round her lovely face, and the man was leaning over her, smiling adoringly, one hand on her shoulder. He was dark too, and looked as if he would like to eat her up, Anne thought with a chuckle.

She studied the picture for several minutes before she remembered the time and looked at her watch. Goodness, she must hurry now, not waste time gazing at a picture of a gorgeous man.

In her bedroom she got out the charcoal-grey suit and dark turquoise blouse she always wore for weddings. Her tutor at college had advised her always to wear dark, inconspicuous clothes when she was working at a wedding, so that she could fade into the background.

As she pulled off her jeans and top she looked down with a pang at the ring on her left hand with its tiny cluster of diamonds and thought

fleetingly that it would be nice if it were she who was dressing in a white bridal dress with a veil and bouquet. But there wasn't any chance of that.

When Keith had ended their engagement at Christmas, when she'd had to back out of going to a party with him because her father hadn't been well enough to be left, she had tried to pull off her ring but had found it was stuck tight. She had caught her hand in a car door a few weeks previously and the swelling that remained had still been enough to make it impossible to remove the ring.

As she had pulled at it fruitlessly Keith had said casually, 'Oh, don't bother with it. Keep the ring—it isn't worth much.' And that had hurt almost as much as his constant grumbling that it wasn't any fun for him, being engaged to a girl who spent all her time running round after a demanding invalid.

'You're too soft-hearted,' Keith had told her. 'You can't say no, that's your trouble. You need to toughen up, Anne. People take advantage of you.'

'But Daddy's ill. He needs me,' she had said unhappily.

'Well, I'm afraid I don't.' He had probably decided that it suited him best to be brutal. 'I've had enough. I'm off tomorrow on a trip abroad. You won't be hearing from me again.'

The wound was still raw, when she allowed herself to think of it. She had loved Keith and had thought he loved her, and if Daddy had not been a darling she might have felt bitter about men.

But now Daddy had gone too, leaving her quite alone, and she had had to put grieving aside and concentrate on how she was going to manage. She simply must make a success of the video business. She'd hate to have to go back to office work again. But she really must have

Keith's ring removed, she vowed as she pulled on black tights and low-heeled sandals.

Anne finished dressing and, having reassured herself that nobody would mistake her for one of the wedding guests, she went back to the editing suite for her holdall. Taking a last look round the tidy little room, her eyes softened. She always remembered how Daddy had fitted up this room for her and bought all the equipment. That had been a short time before he had retired from his position as music master at the local primary school. She had already taken a course in computing and word processing but had been keen on trying her luck at video work, and Daddy had thought it was a good idea.

'You can't have too much training,' he had told her. 'I want to be sure that you can keep yourself in comfort when I'm no longer here to look after you.' His eyes had softened in a way she could never forget as he'd added, 'You shouldn't have chosen middle-aged parents, you know.' And she'd known he had been thinking of her mother, who had died only a week or two after she was born.

'But I've got Keith,' she had said. She and Keith had got engaged at about that time.

Daddy had stuck to his opinion. 'You never know what may happen,' he'd said, and how right he had been! It had only been weeks later that he'd had a stroke and she had given up her first secretarial job to look after him. He had died a month ago.

Suddenly the neatly stacked shelves in the editing suite blurred before her eyes and she got out a handkerchief and blew her nose hard. She mustn't let herself dwell on the past. She had a job to do. She locked the front door and went to get her small car out of the parking space at the back of the house.

Offleigh was a very small village with a very large church, which looked its best on a sunny morning like this.

Anne turned into the lane beside the church and backed her car carefully into the parking space allotted to her yesterday by the vicar when she had explained to him that she needed to leave immediately after the end of the service, so that she would be at the reception in time to catch the guests arriving and being greeted by the bride and groom and their parents.

She had found the vicar delightfully helpful. He had taken her on a tour of the church and told her a little of its history. It dated from Norman times, although it had been extensively added to later. He had helped her to decide where she could set up her camera to get the best view during the service and had told her how to get to the vestry where the signing of the register would take place. He had also assured her that she would have no difficulty in following the service, that it was to be traditional even down to the organ music. Anne had been truly grateful to him for being so interesting and so helpful, and wished that all vicars could be as nice as this one.

Getting out of her car now, she stood and gazed with pleasure at the old church. It looked very beautiful on this June morning, the sunlight, shining between the branches of a tall chestnut tree, making dappled patches of silver on the ancient stones. The shape of the square tower stood out bravely against the flat blue sky as it must have done for centuries past, although Anne could see quite clearly the places where the stone had been patched over and over again—as the vicar had pointed out to her yesterday. Small birds—swallows? House- martins?—wheeled round the tower, diving to a place beneath the eaves where they evidently had a nest. She stood watching them, enjoying the quietness and peace of the morning.

Suddenly the peace was broken as a large green car turned the corner of the lane, swished round and backed into the parking space next to

her own. The powerful engine throbbed for a moment and then was silent. A car door opened and slammed again. Anne lugged her heavy holdall out of the back seat of her car and put it down on the grass verge while she felt inside the door to press the lock.

A man's voice from just behind her said curtly, 'How long do you propose to stay here?'

A church official, perhaps? But why did he have to speak so peremptorily? She turned to confront him. He was obviously not a church official. He must be a guest. He was wearing formal attire—morning suit of striped trousers and a long coat, slightly shaped to the waist— and there was a pink carnation in his buttonhole. He was very tall and very dark, and he wore a hard, angry expression.

She played for time while she thought how to deal with him without making any unpleasantness. 'Er—what did you say?'

He clicked his tongue impatiently. 'I asked how long you proposed to stay here,' he repeated.

Then she realised suddenly who he was—he was the best man. Mark something. She recognised him from the photograph, in which he had been smiling down adoringly at the gorgeous model. His face was hard and unsmiling now. Anne reminded herself that the best man was responsible for getting the guests into their cars after the ceremony, so perhaps that could excuse his abrupt approach. He might even be feeling nervous about his role in the wedding.

She looked up at him and said mildly, 'I propose to stay until the end of the ceremony. Why do you ask?'

She saw the angry light in his dark eyes. 'Well, you can't leave that thing here,' he said, with a contemptuous gesture towards her white

Metro which, although lovingly polished and regularly serviced, was beginning to show its age.

She began to feel very annoyed. 'I certainly have no intention of moving it,' she said coldly.

He passed a glance over her, standing very straight in her off-the-peg grey suit, and took a deep breath. 'Now, look Were, my girl,' he said, and his tone was more insulting than impatient, 'if you've come early to get a good spot to gawp at a wedding it doesn't concern me, but you must certainly remove your car to another place—much further away.'

Anne locked the door of the Metro very slowly and deliberately. She turned back to him. 'And what will you do if I refuse? Send for the police with lifting gear? I doubt if you'll find any in this village.' The dark blue eyes that could so easily sparkle with laughter were as cold as ice.

He made a furious noise in his throat. 'This is ridiculous. I shall see the vicar and have your car removed.'

'You do that,' she said. 'Tell him Miss Anne Grey has parked her car in a place you don't approve of. I'm sure he'll help you. He is most courteous,' she added pointedly.

She picked up her holdall and stalked away from him towards the church gates. She held her head high, but as she hurried up the side-aisle she was annoyed to find that her knees were shaking and she glanced over her shoulder in case he was behind her.

As she reached the place between the pillar of the chancel arch and the back row of the choir stalls and put down her holdall, she told herself that she mustn't let that abominable man get under her skin. She should be proud of herself. He had been extremely rude and she

had stood up to him... but there had been something in that hard dark face which had sent a tremor of fear to the pit of her stomach.

She peeped round the pillar and saw that he had come into the church and was talking to the vicar beside the vestry door. She could hear the rumble of the deep voice and the vicar's soft-spoken replies but couldn't make out a word. After a time the best man nodded and seemed to be thanking the vicar before he turned and walked out of the church.

Anne breathed more easily. That was that and she must put the rather horrid little episode right out of her mind. She would need all her concentration when the wedding began.

She spared a few moments to look round the church again with deep pleasure, enjoying the scent of the flowers which filled every corner and the way the sun cast coloured patches on the rows of pews as it shone through the big south window. A heavenly place for a wedding, she thought as she started on her work.

The next half-hour was spent in setting up the tripod and camera and checking that she would get the best shots of the bride and groom from here as they took their vows. Yes, she decided at last, it would be perfect. She needed particularly to focus on the bride's face when she made her responses. Next there was the off-camera mike to be installed where it would pick up the words of the service, as close as possible to the spot where the vicar would stand but without being obtrusive. This was always a headache, but at last it was done and the wires taped to the floor carefully.

The church bells had been chiming for some time, and she glanced at her watch. The guests would be arriving soon. Unhitching the camera from its tripod, she carried it out-to the front of the church where a crowd was already collecting on both sides of the path to the entrance.

Of course everyone in the neighbourhood would be there to see the squire's daughter arriving for her wedding.

There was also a TV team from the local station. She knew the cameraman, Bob Riley, from her college days, and exchanged a few words with him. He was decent enough to make sure she had a good place beside him to film the guests arriving and the bride with her father.

'How's business, Anne?' enquired Bob. 'I'm going freelance shortly. I'm tired of the local stuff—I want to branch out a bit. Roger French is coming in with me as producer-director, and we'll probably pick up a few more of the guys and gals.' He chuckled. 'Wish me luck. Oh, here's the first contingent. Off we go, Anne.'

He lifted his camera to his eye and Anne, after removing her glasses and sticking them into her pocket, followed suit. She couldn't cope with the glasses while she had her eye glued to the camera.

Twenty minutes later Anne's arms were aching, but the arrival of the elegant guests had duly been recorded. The bride's mother arrived next, with an older woman, and a minute or two later the six little bridesmaids, pink-cheeked and cherubic in frilly voile dresses of hyacinth-blue, were decanted from three cars and shepherded by mothers and aunts into the porch, to a chorus of, 'Ah! Aren't they sweet?' from the crowd.

One of the six was taller than the rest. She was, no doubt, the chief bridesmaid. It would be the best man's job to look after her, and Anne hoped for the little girl's sake that he could smile as well as scowl.

There was a lull in the proceedings now as they waited for the bride and her father. Anne balanced her camera on her shoulder and shook her tired arms one by one. Then, only about five minutes late, a beribboned Rolls-Royce glided up to the gate and the bride was

helped out carefully by her father. More murmurs of admiration came from the crowd, and a ripple of applause. Anne, concentrating on getting the best angles, could see only that Elizabeth Brent was a dream in cream satin and lace as she walked slowly up the path on her father's arm.

With a hasty goodbye to Bob, who wouldn't be working inside the church, Anne hurried round to the south door and back to her station beside the pillar, avoiding the porch where the procession would be forming.

Fixing the camera back on its tripod and checking that the monitor screen was properly connected to the camera, she was able to draw a deep breath and prepare herself for the next stage of the service. The bells had ceased and the organist was playing a Bach prelude. The bridegroom had taken his place at the chancel steps, the best man standing beside him, and Anne focused on them to check her position.

The profile of the best man came into view and she couldn't resist zooming in on it for a moment. In the zoom lens his profile looked serious but no longer grim. She gave him full marks for that. If he hadn't made the effort to look cheerful to back up his friend on this nervy occasion he wouldn't have been human.

Suddenly, to her horror, he turned his head. She saw him full-face now, and it was as if they were staring into each other's eyes from only inches apart. She felt again that odd jolt in her stomach. It wasn't really like that, of course; he couldn't see her face, several yards away and hidden behind the camera. He had probably heard a sound from somewhere behind her and had moved his head to see where it had come from.

It was only a couple of seconds before she turned the camera away, retracting the zoom lens, but in those seconds she had registered every single detail of the hard, handsome face—the dark hair, curling

slightly at the temples, the furrows in the wide brow, the long, curving lashes over night-dark eyes, the small lines round the long, sensitive mouth, even the pores of his skin where he had shaved earlier. She saw something else in that momentary flash—he was not angry or bad-tempered. He was deeply unhappy.

The realisation was a shock. Anne's hands were trembling as they gripped the handle of the tripod. Pull yourself together, you idiot, she told herself. You're supposed to be a professional, and professionals don't allow their minds to wander.

The bride's mother came alone up the aisle and quietly slipped into the second pew, then the choir of boys and girls filed in, followed by the vicar, who, after a short pause before the altar, took his place beneath the chancel arch. The bridegroom and best man were standing before him to one side. The organ music faded away into silence and a hush of expectation fell over the congregation.

The solemnity of the moment got through to Anne, and her hands were damp as they adjusted the camera. Then the first notes of the 'Bridal March' sounded and the bridal procession appeared from the porch and began the slow walk up the aisle, the bride on her father's arm, followed by her bridesmaids. From then on it was total concentration for Anne. Not a moment of the service must be lost.

She worked with confidence, missing nothing, through the singing of the hymns, the prayers, the address by the vicar, the exchanging of rings, and the move to the vestry to catch the signing of the register. She dashed back again to change the cassette before she made her way down the church to be in place when the couple came down the aisle together. Hastily she slipped the cassette out of the camera, dropping it into her holdall, and put a new one in.

She'd better be on the safe side and change the battery too, although she didn't think that the old one was exhausted. It was dark in her

corner of the church, and she had to fiddle with inserting the new battery. She was feeling quite unbearably hot. She just couldn't go out into the sunshine again without removing her jacket. She pulled it off hastily and tossed it down just as the organ began triumphantly to fill the church with the strains of the well-loved Mendelssohn 'Wedding March'.

Gripping her camera, she hurried down the side-aisle to a spot from where she could record the progress of the bride and bridegroom, smiling happily, down the nave, with the bridesmaids following behind.

Outside in the churchyard the photographer had arrived, and was soon busily organising people into groups. After taking a few casual shots, Anne left him to it and hurried back up the side-aisle to reclaim her holdall.

She packed her camera and tripod away and then picked up her jacket—or rather she tried to pick it up. It seemed to have got stuck somehow in the end choir stall. Her glasses were in the pocket and without them it was difficult to see what had happened. Anne pulled at it and swished it from side to side, trying to unhook it. Finally, with a tearing sound as the lining was released, the jacket was free. She clicked her tongue as she saw a long rip up the lining, but that could wait to be examined when she got home. She pushed on her glasses, zipped up her holdall and left the church by the south door.

Her car was, of course, where she had parked it. For just a second she wondered if the best man might have had it moved after all. That would have been victory for the male sex. But not this time, she thought with a wry grin as she unlocked it, threw in the holdall and jacket and set out to drive to the Brent residence, a few miles away, where the reception was to be held.

She did not turn into the drive, but found a place to leave her car further along the lane beside the high wall which surrounded the grounds, and walked back to where a large marquee had been put up on the lawn of the impressive mansion of Sir William Brent.

It was hot inside, with an overpowering smell of flowers and cut grass. Two long trestle-tables indicated that the meal was to be a buffet, and maids from a catering firm were bustling about with plates and glasses. The food would no doubt be brought from the house at the last minute.

Anne enquired of an older woman who seemed to be in charge of the proceedings where the wedding cake would be placed, so that she could position herself out of the way but at the best angle to record the cutting of the cake and the speeches. She found a corner to place the microphone and waited for the next stage of the proceedings. She was beginning to feel tired and very hot. She would be thankful when it was all over.

The parents were the first to arrive, followed by the bride and groom, and a line was formed to welcome the guests. Last lap! Anne told herself.

Soon the marquee was full of people, and the smell of expensive perfume mingled with that of flowers and the delectable goodies on trays which the maids were carrying in and laying out on the tables. Champagne followed in buckets of ice, and lastly the cake, a glorious pyramid of dazzling whiteness. The sound of talk and laughter rose and fell and finally rose in a crescendo as the bride pretended that she had to be helped by her husband to cut the cake.

Anne was working mechanically when it came to the speeches, and as soon as they were over she parked her camera and tripod with her holdall and jacket in a corner of the marquee and found her way out into the cool air. There was a garden seat under a clump of trees quite

close and she sank down onto it, closed her eyes and lifted her face to the refreshing breeze.

She wasn't aware of a tall figure approaching across the grass. 'Hello, Miss Grey.'

Anne's eyes flew open to see the best man standing before her, a plate in one hand and a glass of champagne in the other. He held the glass out to her. 'A peace offering,' he said.

Her earlier resentment had faded, the memory of it erased by the moment when his eyes had looked into hers so closely—so intimately, it had seemed—through the lens of her camera.

'Oh! Oh, thank you,' she murmured weakly. She felt absurdly shy and lowered her face over the glass as she took a long drink of the blessedly cold champagne. 'That's lovely.'

He sat down beside her. 'I thought you looked as if you needed it. I'd no idea that recording a wedding involved such hard work.' He still wasn't smiling but his tone was friendly now. 'And I did my best to make things more difficult for you,' he added wryly. 'Please have some cake as an indication of your forgiveness.' He put the plate on the seat between them.

Anne tried to think of something concise and witty to say in reply, but the words didn't come. Instead she smiled at him through her large glasses and took a bite of the delicious wedding cake.

'Good,' he said. 'Now all debts are settled.' He leaned back in the wooden seat. 'Have you finished your labours yet?'

This was easier. She chased a crumb of cake round the plate and said, 'Not quite. I still have to wait for the bridal couple to leave for their honeymoon. Then I can pack up and go home. But there will be at

least twelve more hours to spend on editing the tapes. I'll wait for tomorrow to tackle that.'

He nodded. 'You'd better keep an eye on the goings-on inside. I don't suppose Andrew and Liz will hang about long; they've got to drive to Dorset. Andrew has a cottage and a boat there. They plan to spend their honeymoon cruising round the Greek Islands and I think they want to make a start today.'

Anne drank the last drops of her champagne and put the glass down on the empty plate between them. 'What a lovely idea.' She stood up. 'Thank you for the sustenance and the kind thought, Mr...'

'Rayne,' he said. 'Mark Rayne.'

As he rose she smiled up at him. He was very tall; if only he would smile he would be really handsome, she thought. She knew he *could* smile. The photograph in the newspaper had shown him smiling beatifically at his lovely fiancée. Perhaps it was because she wasn't here with him that he looked so gloomy.

'Well, thank you again, Mr Rayne,' she said, turning to go.

'It was the least I could do,' he replied gravely.

There was a spring in Anne's step as she hurried back into the marquee. She hated to be on bad terms with anyone, and Mark Rayne had apologised very handsomely even if he couldn't manage a smile.

The bridal couple were no longer in the marquee; they must have gone into the house to change before leaving. Anne collected her camera and tripod and made her way round to the front of Sir William Brent's impressive Neo- Gothic mansion. At the foot of a long flight of steps an open car, a Mercedes, was pulled up. Other expensive-looking cars lined the forecourt and the overflow was parked

diagonally down the wide drive. She set up her tripod in a spot beside the long, shiny bonnet of the car and hoped for the best.

Very soon the guests began to drift out of the marquee and stand around the car and up the steps, but they were all too polite to push in front of her. It seemed a long wait, but at last the chatter died down and bags of confetti were produced as the small party from the house came down the steps. Anne swivelled her camera round and got a marvellous view of the bride, dressed now in a honey-coloured suit that matched her hair, which hung round her pretty face like a golden halo as it caught the sunlight. Her husband, in a lightweight suit, was beside her, and next to him the best man, Mark Rayne, with the parents and close relatives.

Anne felt rather absurdly conscious of him as he took his place on the bottom step, almost by her side. He looked down at her as she lifted her head for a moment and nodded. She would have liked to move away, but of course that wasn't possible.

Confetti was falling like rain all over the car now. People were calling out, kissing, laughing, but at last the bridegroom helped his bride into the passenger seat of the car and climbed in behind the wheel. Anne kept her eyes glued to the camera. That was a most beautiful shot of the bride. She looked so blissfully happy as she lifted her face towards her new husband. Already Anne was composing the end of the video in her mind.

Then—suddenly—something hit her on the head, and she looked up, startled, and saw what had happened. The bride had thrown her bouquet high in the air and it had landed on—of all people—the woman taking the video. Anne clutched it, her cheeks scarlet, as everyone laughed. She caught a whiff of the lilies of the valley as she threw it back into the crowd.

She felt a touch on her arm and heard Mark Rayne murmur, close to her ear, 'I noticed you were wearing a ring. That should speed matters up.'

She was disturbingly conscious of the feeling of his hand on her bare arm. He had beautiful hands, she noticed, the fingers strong and sensitive. She gave him a tremulous little smile before she turned back to her camera, and although he still wasn't smiling she thought she detected a wicked glint in his dark eyes.

The car drew away to cheers and calls of good wishes and showers of confetti. Anne made her way hastily back to the marquee and packed her gear into the holdall. By the time the guests began to filter back, ready for more food and drink and socialising, she was on her way down the drive, making quickly for her car—and home.

She drove slowly along the country lanes. After a large wedding like this her head seemed full of moving pictures, and it took her a while to return to the real world. One picture kept coming back again and again—the face of Mark Rayne, the enigmatic best man. She would never see him again, except on video, when she edited the tapes, but it wasn't a face she would easily forget.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS nearly nine o'clock and beginning to get dark when the blow fell. After a leisurely supper Anne was unpacking her holdall in the editing suite when the horrible fact emerged—cassette number two, the most important one, the one which held her recording of the heart of the wedding, was missing. A feverish search of every corner of the holdall confirmed the fact. She stared down at the worktop. Cassettes four, three and one were in order, but there was a gap where two should have been.

Don't panic, she told herself. Think. Think. When did you take cassette two out of the camera and what did you do with it? She sank onto the stool and pressed a shaking hand to her forehead.

After the signing of the registry in the vestry, that was it. In a hurry to get down to the front of the church and record the bridal couple walking back down the aisle together, she had pulled the cassette out of the camera and slipped the next one in. It had been quite dark in her corner and she must have dropped cassette two on the floor instead of putting it back in the holdall, and later, when she'd been struggling to get her jacket free, she must have swept the cassette behind the pillar or under the choir stall. So—it must still be there, and all she had to do was drive back to the church and find it.

Another two hours' driving! But it would be worth it—anything would be worth it if she could only lay her hands on precious cassette number two. Without it the video would be useless.

She had changed when she got home, into jeans and a cotton top, and now she hurried upstairs and pulled on a thick woollen jumper, swilled her face in cold water and went to get the car out again.

The church clock was striking ten when Anne reached Offleigh. The single streetlamp was situated in the main street of the village, some

distance from the church. When she had parked her car and turned out the lights she had to wait for a moment to accustom her eyes to the darkness and then she found the front path and made her way to the porch. 'Please let the church not be locked,' she breathed.

She was fumbling with the heavy ring handle of the massive door when steps sounded behind her and the light of a torch shone round her feet. A gruff voice said, 'Sorry, I've just come to lock up.' Not the vicar's voice. It must be the church warden.

Anne turned and the light of the torch fell on her face. 'Oh, please,' she said. 'Could you wait for a few minutes? I was at the wedding this afternoon and I've lost something rather valuable. I know exactly where I dropped it, and if I could just have a chance to look round...'

He must have heard the desperation in her voice. He leaned nearer and looked into her face, and after a short time for consideration he said, 'OK, come in. I'll switch on the lights.'

'Thank you,' Anne whispered fervently. She scurried up the side-aisle to the place by the pillar where she had parked her gear. The church warden followed more sedately. He helped her to search while she explained the circumstances to him.

After ten minutes they had covered every square inch of the floor where the cassette might have fallen, but had drawn a blank. Anne felt like bursting into tears. 'It isn't here,' she said in a wan voice.

The church warden agreed. 'But the vicar might have it, miss. It might have been handed in to him.'

Anne clutched at the straw. 'Where could I find him? Would you direct me to the vicarage?'

He shook his head. 'He doesn't live in the village. He lives in Lifton-on-the-Hill. He has to look after both parishes. And there won't be any services here tomorrow.'

'I see,' Anne said in a defeated voice. 'Well, thank you very much; you've been very helpful.' She got back into the car as the elderly man switched off the church lights and ambled round to the side-door.

Anne drove a short way out of the village and stopped to think. Should she drive out to Lifton-on-the-Hill now? It must be over ten miles away, on the Stow road. It would be nearly eleven o'clock by the time she got there, and it would probably mean knocking up the vicar and getting him out of bed. Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. Putting the car into gear, she headed once more for home.

The journey back seemed to take hours as she stared ahead at the road and refused to let herself consider what it would mean if she had really lost the cassette. But once in the house the emptiness closed round her and panic stirred, giving her a hollow feeling inside. She relied mainly on recommendations from satisfied clients, and had had high hopes of doing a good job for the influential Brent family. Things soon got around—negative as well as positive. 'Oh, I shouldn't have any dealings with Anne Grey—she's most unreliable.' She could almost hear the words already. She had to face the fact that she might have lost the cassette for good. Perhaps one of the cleaners had thrown it into a rubbish bag, or a choirboy had picked it up and slipped it into his pocket. To a boy any video was a video and might be investing. Anne shivered. The house felt very cold. She made a pot of strong tea—the panacea for all ills—and drank it sitting in the kitchen.

She tried to cheer herself up. There was still the vicar. She could find him tomorrow morning, and surely he would have the cassette? As she drank the tea she glanced wearily at her watch. She might as well go to bed; there was nothing else to do tonight.

She emptied the teapot and her glasses fell off into the sink. Picking them out, she saw that one of the side pieces had come off. A hasty search in the sink revealed the fact that the tiny screw had vanished—probably down the plughole. Tears of frustration came into her eyes at this final annoyance. This was definitely not her day. Leaving the glasses on the kitchen table to be dealt with tomorrow, she switched off the lights and started to climb the stairs, her head drooping.

She was halfway up when the front doorbell rang shrilly. Her heart thudded. Who could it possibly be at this hour? Holding onto the banister, she waited, hardly daring to breathe. But the bell rang again, and then again. Anne crept downstairs and across the hall, switching on the light. Without removing the chain she opened the door a crack and peered round it.

In the light from the hall she saw that there was a large man standing outside, but without her glasses she couldn't make out his face. She felt a horrid qualm of fear. 'Who are you, and what do you want?'

A man's deep voice said irritably, 'Open the door, can't you? I'm not a burglar:'

She knew that voice. Mark Rayne. Her first thought was, He's got the cassette. That's why he's here. Hope shot up like a thermometer plunged into hot water. She slipped off the chain and threw open the door. As the light from the hall fell on him she saw that he had changed out of his morning suit and was wearing jeans and a pullover.

He leaned closer and stared at her. 'I'm looking for Anne Grey; I've got something for her.' He patted his jumper as if expecting to find pockets there.

'I'm Anne Grey,' she said.

He peered closer, swaying slightly, and put a hand on the doorframe to steady himself. He shook his head. 'Are you sure? You don't look like her.'

'I assure you I am,' she said, and laughed. She realised that he might be a little drunk, but that didn't matter beside the glorious fact that he probably had the cassette. 'Won't you come in? And then you can find- whatever it is you have for me.' She mustn't rush matters; he might get angry and go away.

He went on patting himself, feeling for non-existent pockets. 'I know it's here somewhere. I must have put it in my case.' He turned round and walked rather unsteadily to his car, which was standing at the kerb. Anne pattered after him; she wasn't going to let him get away until he had found what must be the cassette.

He opened the back door of the car and heaved a heavy suitcase along the seat. Balancing it on the edge, he began to fumble with its catch, muttering to himself.

Anne pulled the case away from him. 'Let's take it inside,' she said firmly. 'You can't see what you're doing out here.'

He seemed a little surprised but he let her carry the heavy case into the house and dump it on a chair in the sitting room. He followed her inside and stood staring at her in puzzlement. 'I don't think you *are* Anne Grey,' he said, slowly and carefully. 'She looked like a ghost—and you look like...' He thought for a long time and then finished triumphantly, 'Like Goldilocks.' He reached out and touched a lock of golden hair, which was now hanging in a wavy mass to her shoulders. 'Nice!' he said.

Anne moved away quickly. Had she been quite mad to invite the man into the house at this time of night? She must find the cassette and then get rid of him.

'Won't you sit down,' she said, 'and let me open the case?'

He stared at her as if he still wasn't sure who she was. 'Thank you,' he said politely, and collapsed backwards onto the large sofa. 'Yes, by all means open it.'

She let him sit there while she managed to get the case open. It contained his morning suit, carelessly folded, three clean handkerchiefs, and a crumpled white shirt rolled round a pair of underpants. There was also shaving gear and a hairbrush and comb. She felt all round the edges of the case without success. As a last resort she examined the striped trousers. No large pockets in them! Then she held up the coat and found that it had an inside pocket which seemed to contain something bulky. Hardly daring to hope, she felt inside it—and drew out the missing cassette.

Anne couldn't restrain a little whoop of pure joy and relief. 'Oh, thank you, thank you,' she cried, looking at the man on the sofa. He was leaning back with his eyes closed. She shook his arm. 'I've found it,' she burred.

He opened his eyes with an effort, mumbled, 'Have you? Good,' and then closed them again.

Anne regarded him doubtfully. He didn't really look drunk, he looked absolutely exhausted. His face was colourless and there were deep dark smudges below his eyes. She would make some black coffee and then wake him up and somehow get him back in his car—although he really didn't look as if he should be driving. Well, she'd have to see how things went.

While the kettle was boiling she took the cassette to the editing suite and placed it tenderly on the worktop. She'd run it through on the monitor to check up on it, even gloat a little, as soon as she'd got rid of Mark Rayne.

In the kitchen the kettle had boiled. Anne spooned coffee liberally into a mug, filled it and carried it back to the sitting room. In her absence the man had made himself comfortable. He was stretched out on the sofa, his long legs curled up like a child's. He was breathing deeply and evenly, undoubtedly fast asleep. The thick black lashes that she had seen through the zoom lens rested on his cheekbones. His mouth, no longer held in a stern, tight line, was relaxed as he breathed deeply.

She put down the cup of coffee and went on staring at him. He really was fabulously good-looking. Anne's mouth twitched into a soft smile—the smile of amused tenderness that she would bestow on any sleeping creature, human or not.

'Yes,' she said aloud. 'You're very appealing, no doubt. But you can't stay here.' She leaned forward and shouted, 'Mr Rayne.'

No reply.

'Mr Rayne, I've made some coffee. Wake up, can't you?' She shook his arm as hard as she could.

Silence, except for the faintest of grunts.

Anne frowned, perplexed. So—it was like that, was it? She couldn't get rid of him unless she removed him bodily—which was impossible—or rang for the police—which was unthinkable.

She sighed. He wasn't going to wake up for some time, and she did owe him a debt of gratitude for returning the cassette, however tardily. He might as well stay here and have his sleep out. She fetched a blanket and draped it over him. He didn't stir when she pulled off his shoes. The suitcase lay on the chair, its contents hanging out. Well, he could pack that for himself when he left. He would probably wake some time in the night and let himself out.

She lit the table lamp and switched off the main light. Was there anything else? Oh, yes—his car. It had been left standing in the road, unlocked. Anne rushed out, holding her breath. There had been a car theft in this road only last week.

She breathed again when she saw that it was still there, with the keys hanging from the ignition. She regarded it doubtfully. Ought she to move it into the parking space at the back of the house? She'd never handled a powerful car like this in her life and the passage between the two houses was quite narrow. Better leave it where it was. There was probably some security gadget fitted. She locked the driver's door and found that the other doors locked as well.

Taking the keys back to the house, she placed them on the low table by the sofa. Mark Rayne was even more deeply asleep. He looked very peaceful. Anne went out and closed the door. Now, at last, to watch the result of all her work this afternoon.

Fetching her glasses from the kitchen, she managed to perch them on her nose. She could see the monitor screen well enough if she didn't move her head. The recording proved to be superb—the best thing she'd ever done. Nothing of importance had been missed, the angles were just right and the lighting inside the church had been much better than Anne had expected. She ran it through to the end and shut off the monitor with a sigh of satisfaction. How truly terrible if she had actually lost it through her own carelessness! She felt a surge of gratitude to Mark Rayne for bringing it back to her.

Turning off the downstairs lights again, she listened for a moment outside the sitting-room door. There wasn't a sound from inside. Well, let him enjoy his sleep, she thought, her mouth quirking into a soft smile.

As she climbed the stairs to her bedroom she was suddenly overcome with tiredness. It had been a gruelling day, one way or another. She

washed her face, cleaned her teeth and, standing by the bed, wondered for a moment whether she should keep her clothes on. After all, there was a strange man sleeping in the sitting room. Anne shrugged. She was almost sure he didn't present a threat. But when she had pulled off her jeans and top and put her nightdress on she went across the room and locked the door. She climbed into bed and was fast asleep within five minutes.

Anne woke later than usual. The first thing she did was cross the room, pull back the curtains and look down into the road. Yes, the green car was still there, steaming gently as the sun dispersed the morning dew from its long, sleek bonnet. She was annoyed to find that her heart was beating faster than usual.

She didn't have to worry about what the neighbours might think if they saw a strange man leaving her house with a suitcase early in the morning. Most of the houses in the road had been made into flats, and there was such a rapid turnover of occupants that she never had time to get to know anyone. That wasn't the problem. The problem was how she was going to deal with Mark Rayne.

It was such a very odd situation. If he had been a man she knew, she could have turned the Whole thing into an amusing episode and they would have laughed together and avoided any awkwardness. But she hadn't even seen him smile yet. She wondered if he would remember saying that she looked like Goldilocks. Probably not. It had seemed out of character.

She wasn't at all sure why she chose to wear a golden yellow top with her jeans this morning. Probably because it was her favourite and she needed something to boost her courage when she went down to deal with her unconventional visitor.

When she opened the sitting-room door she was relieved to find that he was awake. He had put on his shoes and the blanket was folded neatly on the sofa. He was in the process of trying to get his case locked and looked round quickly when he heard her come in. She decided to play it lightly, even if he didn't respond. She smiled at him. 'Good morning, Mr Rayne. Sorry you didn't have a more comfortable bed.'

He straightened his long body. 'I really am desperately-sorry. I feel ashamed of myself for passing out on you like I must have done. A couple of whiskies with friends at my hotel on top of the champagne and having been driving for about thirty-six hours was the reason, if not the excuse. I hope your family aren't thinking of handing me over to the police. Perhaps I could see your mother and apologise to her, as well as to you.'

'My parents are both dead. There's only me,' Anne said simply.

He looked hard at her with a lift of his thick dark brows. 'Do you mean to say you live alone in the house? And you allowed me to stay here all night?'

She laughed. 'I didn't have much choice. You were sleeping the sleep of the—what is it?—the just or the unjust? Anyway, you were immovable. You were in no fit state to drive either. Also, I felt eternally grateful to you for bringing the cassette. So, all things considered, what would you have expected me to do?'

'You could have rung the police,' he suggested. 'Although,' he added quite seriously, 'your sofa was much more comfortable than a cell in the police station, I'm sure.' He was looking hard at her, but still he didn't smile. 'May I ask who you are?'

Anne gasped in surprise. 'I'm Anne Grey, of course. Don't you remember me from the wedding?'

He shook his head. 'You look so very different. But I must believe it if you tell me so.'

Nothing about Goldilocks this morning! Anne wanted to giggle.

He turned back to struggle with the lock of the case again. Anne said, 'Let me help. I'm afraid I had to pull things out last night when I was searching for the cassette.'

She took out the morning coat and refolded it carefully. She put it back and her hand touched his as he held the large case steady while she got the lid shut. She drew in a quick breath as a thrill of electricity passed up her arm. She had often read about this sudden sexual attraction that could pass between two complete strangers, but had never quite believed it could happen.

She forced down the lid of the case and held it while he snapped the locks.

'Thank you,' he said, and she couldn't meet his eyes. But she could feel that they were looking steadily at her. She wished he would laugh, or even smile—anything to break the strange awkwardness that had suddenly sprung up between them.

At last he said, 'Well, I'll relieve you of my company, and thanks again for your kindness.' He carried the case into the hall.

Suddenly Anne knew that she didn't want him to go yet. She wanted to find out more about him. 'Have you far to drive?' she asked.

The long mouth drew into a rueful grimace. 'About three hundred miles.'

'Oh, dear, then you must let me make you a cup of coffee before you go,' she said quickly. 'If you'd like to wash, the cloakroom is just down the passage. Come into the kitchen when you're ready.' She

didn't give him time to refuse. She hurried into the kitchen and switched on the kettle. She made two mugs of coffee and popped two pieces of bread into the toaster, laying butter and marmalade on the table with plates and knives.

A few minutes later Mark Rayne joined her. 'I feel more human now,' he said. He had evidently put his head under the tap; his black hair was wet and gleaming. He ran a hand over his chin. 'I would have had a shave, in your honour, but I couldn't face the hassle of getting the case opened and closed again, so please forgive me if I look like a pirate.' He took the chair which Anne indicated.

She put a mug of coffee before him and said, 'Don't let that worry you. I broke my glasses last night so I can't see you properly.' She wished she could see his expression, but without her glasses his face was blurred.

At last he said, 'That's what it is. You were wearing glasses yesterday—and your hair was different, surely?'

She shook out her mop of gold curls. 'I always wear it tied back when I'm working, and I always wear dark clothes so that I can fade into the background.'

'I see,' he said. 'I was conscious of a small grey ghost flitting about the church.' She could almost imagine he was smiling. But his tone was serious again as he said, 'It's really very kind of you to feed me like this, especially when I put you to such trouble last night.' He spread marmalade on a piece of toast. 'Will you give my apologies to your fiance when you tell him? I wish I could see him myself to explain.'

Anne looked down at the ring on her left hand, and for a moment she wondered whether to tell this man that her engagement had been ended months ago, but she couldn't do that without telling him why

the ring was still on her finger. So she said lightly, 'Oh, Keith would understand; he's abroad at present.'

Mark Rayne was looking hard at her with a slight frown. 'I keep wondering why you're living alone in this big house. Surely it's too large for one small girl? Or is that a tactless remark?' he added hastily.

She felt herself flush very slightly. She supposed it might be taken for granted, in this day and age, that she and her fiance should be living together. She didn't quite know why she should be so eager to dispel that idea from his mind. 'It's my family home. I live quite alone here. My mother died soon after I was born and my father died only last month,' she said quietly. She had to turn her face away quickly to hide the tears that sprang into her eyes; she hadn't yet got over Daddy's death. 'Of course it's too big for me. I shall have to try my luck in the house market soon, I suppose.'

He nodded. 'Yes, perhaps you should do that,' he said gravely. He finished his coffee and the last piece of toast and stood up. 'Well, mind you don't let in any more wandering good-for-nothings to disturb you.'

'I would let anyone in if they brought me back something valuable that I'd lost,' she said, quite seriously.

She walked to the front door with him. 'Thank you for everything, Anne,' he said quietly. 'You're a lovely, kind girl, and they don't come like that very frequently these days. If ever I can do you a good turn to repay you just ask me.' To her amazement he leaned forward and kissed her cheek gently before he picked up his case and carried it out to the car. He tossed the case on the back seat, got in behind the wheel and lifted his hand. She waved as the car disappeared round the corner of the road.

It was like waving to a friend whom she would see again soon. It seemed strange that he was driving three hundred miles away and that they wouldn't meet again. "'Ships that pass in the night",' she quoted aloud. She couldn't remember the rest of that rather sad poem.

Her eyes were thoughtful as she went in and closed the door. She wouldn't ever solve the enigma that was Mark Rayne.

Anne worked all day and into the night before she was satisfied with the editing of the wedding tapes, and before she went to bed she did something unusual—she made a copy of the finished video to keep for herself and put it away carefully in her bedroom drawer so that it wouldn't get mixed up with any of the other cassettes in the editing suite. She thought that some time she would watch it to see if she could find any trace of a smile on Mark Rayne's handsome face.

She knew that it was silly, but the man had caught her imagination and she found herself wondering about him. She put the cutting from the local paper with the tape, wondering what kind of books he wrote. She was a great reader but she'd never seen his name on any books in the library. She'd enquire some time. But of course he probably used a pen-name... Oh, stop brooding about the man, she told herself. He's nothing to you.

On Monday morning Anne went into the town and took her glasses to the opticians to be mended. While she was there she made arrangements to have a test for fitting contact lenses, keeping her fingers crossed that she would be getting a cheque when she delivered the video.

In the afternoon she drove to the Brent mansion and delivered the video to Lady Brent, who invited her into an elegant drawing room

and gave her tea as the video was played back on an enormous TV screen. Lady Brent was a handsome, grey-haired woman, friendly and with no nonsense about her, who seemed delighted to chat to Anne.

'You've made a wonderful job of it, my dear,' she said enthusiastically at the end. 'I'm sure Elizabeth and Andrew will be delighted with it when they come back from their honeymoon. It will be one of their treasured wedding mementoes—so much more exciting than just a photograph. And Mark would like to have a copy too, to send to his parents. They're retired now, and live in Malta.'

'Mark Rayne was Andrew's best man, you know. They were at school together. He's a very well-known writer— you may have heard of him; he writes under a pen-name...' She looked up at the ceiling and clicked her tongue. 'My memory for names is getting shocking. I know it's something to do with gardens. He writes exciting mystery stories. I'm sure they're very good, but not really my cup of tea.' She laughed. 'I'm afraid I only read gardening books.'

Anne assured her that it would be possible to make another copy and promised to bring it the next day.

'Poor Mark.' Lady Brent sighed. 'He was so disappointed that Trudi couldn't come to the wedding with him. She's his fiancée, you know, quite a well-known model, and he seems completely obsessed by her. She had to go abroad on an assignment. I'm afraid I'm very old-fashioned and out of touch, living in the country. You young people dash about the world so casually these days. I hate to go far from my beloved garden.'

Before she left, Anne had to be shown around the garden, whose full beauty could be appreciated now that the marquee had been removed. It was really lovely, and Anne received a pleased smile from Lady Brent when she expressed her admiration.

But she was thinking more of what Lady Brent had said about Mark and Trudi, and felt she had found out the reason for his low spirits. To be without someone you love, even if only temporarily, made the world seem empty and colourless, as she had found when Keith left her.

She hardly heard what the older woman was saying as she chatted on happily about the wedding and the house that Andrew had bought. 'In the very next village, so they won't be far away—Andrew will commute to his office in London.'

Anne hoped that Lady Brent would suggest recommending her work to friends, but the fond mother was far too engrossed in her family affairs to think about anyone else.

That evening Anne made a second copy of the video, and on Tuesday morning she drove out to deliver it. Lady Brent was away from home, the imposing butler informed her as she handed in the package, but her ladyship had left a letter for Miss Grey.

Anne stopped in a lay-by on the way home and opened the envelope. Inside she found a note of appreciation and a cheque for the agreed fee plus a bonus for the extra copy. Well, she needn't worry about paying for the contact lenses, she thought with relief. But as she drove on she felt almost sad that the unusual episode in her life was over.

But, as it happened, it wasn't quite over. Later that morning a florist's van drew up outside the house.

'Miss Grey?' the girl enquired, and handed Anne a large wrapped bunch of flowers. Who could be sending her flowers? Anne wondered, carrying them into the kitchen. For a moment she thought it might be Keith and that he wanted to be forgiven and taken back. But when she had torn off the wrapping to disclose a huge spray of

mimosa she found a tiny envelope, inside which was a card saying, 'With gratitude and every good wish, M.R.' Mark Rayne! How very nice of him—and how odd that the shop had selected her very favourite flowers.

With a warm feeling of pleasure she filled a brown pottery jug with water, arranged the spray in it and carried it into the sitting room, looking round for a good place to put it down. The low table beside the sofa where Mark Rayne had made himself comfortable was the perfect place. Anne stood, holding the jug in both hands. The mimosa smelled gorgeous and she leaned close to smell the fragrance of the fluffy yellow balls.

What an unexpected man Mark Rayne was! She remembered vividly the strong, hard face she had seen so intimately close-in her camera lens, and then the smoothing out of all the unhappiness as he'd slept.

She put the jug down on the table with an impatient thud, reminding herself that the man was nothing at all to her, and she shook her head at her own foolish fancy as she found herself wishing again that she could have seen him smile—just once—before he'd passed out of her life for ever.

CHAPTER THREE

AFTER the activities of the Brent wedding, the couple of weeks that followed were an anticlimax. There were no answers to Anne's advertisement and her doorstep calls were either flatly rejected or met with a smiling, 'Oh, we have our own camcorder now, thank you.' It was all rather depressing.

Then, to make things worse, the gas bill came in. Anne stared at it with horror. Surely she hadn't used all that gas in one quarter? But it had been a cold spring and it was a big house. Too big, as her wedding-night guest had told her, for one small girl to live in alone. At five feet six and a half she had never considered herself small, but perhaps if you were over six feet it would seem so.

She had a quick, confused picture in her mind of Mark Rayne. She had seen him looking arrogant and disdainful and she had seen him looking charmingly apologetic, and, of course, she had seen him in the photograph with an adoring smile on his lips. Now that she had seen the man she could imagine him looking deeply in love. Her heart seemed to miss a beat. Then she blinked and pulled herself together. This was no time to indulge in fantasies about a man she scarcely knew. She should be thinking about gas bills and how to pay them.

After a whole day spent poring over bills and cash book and bank statements, she had to face the fact that she had been much too optimistic to believe she could support herself with her video work and continue to live in this big house, which was all Daddy had had to leave her. She would have to sell the house and find somewhere much smaller, and if there wasn't enough money left after the mortgage had been paid off it would have to be a bedsitter. And she must find another job.

The only bright spot on the horizon was that she had by now acquired her contact lenses and had gone through the necessary period of adjustment. They were a great success, although she wondered now if she should have spent all that money on them. But they improved not only her looks but her confidence, and they would make her video work much easier—if she ever got any more work.

Suddenly she felt frighteningly alone—Daddy gone, Keith gone and the future stretching ahead emptily. She put her head down on the table and wept.

But this was no time for self-pity, she told herself, wiping her eyes. It was the time for action.

All weekend she worked on the house, cleaning it from top to bottom until it looked cared for, if rather shabby. Tomorrow, she promised herself as she fell into bed late on Sunday night, she would go and visit an estate agent.

Anne slept very late on Monday morning, and by the time she had showered, breakfasted and got dressed to go into town it was after eleven o'clock. Just as she reached the front door the phone rang in the kitchen, and she rushed to answer it. A new customer? Had she despaired too soon?

She lifted the receiver. 'Anne Grey,' she said in her crisp, businesslike voice.

A man's voice said, 'Hello, Anne.' It was a deep voice, and for one mad moment she thought it was Mark Rayne and her throat tightened. Then the voice went on, 'This is Bob Riley here.'

Bob Riley, the cameraman she had been to college with and whom she had met at the Brent wedding, when he had told her he was setting up his own company.

'Bob! How nice to hear from you. How are things going?'

'Badly. I'm in the devil of a fix, Anne. The fact is that I'm in the middle of a job and I've been idiot enough to break my wrist. I can't handle my camera. I can't even pick it up.'

'Oh, Bob, how rotten for you,' she cried with ready sympathy. 'Can I help at all?'

'That's why I've called you,' he said. 'You're my last hope. Are you madly busy?'

Madly busy! That was a joke. 'I'm free just at present,' she said.

'Well, could you possibly get yourself down here and stand in for me at a recording session tomorrow morning? It's a terrific lot to ask of you at a moment's notice, but it's very important. It might be make or break for our new company.'

'Why not? But you haven't told me where "down here" is.'

Bob said sheepishly, 'I didn't want to frighten you off at the start. We're in Cornwall.'

'Cornwall!' Anne gasped. 'B-but that's three hundred miles away.' She looked at her watch, which said nearly midday. The thought of driving three hundred miles on a strange route in her small car was rather horrifying. But Bob was a fellow pro and a friend and she couldn't let him down.

Bob's voice came anxiously from the other end of the line. 'Anne, are you still there?'

'I'm here,' she said. 'I'll try to get to you, Bob. Will you give me the address and advise me on the best route?'

After hours sitting behind the wheel of her car Anne was aching all over by nine o'clock that same evening, when she finally arrived at the address Bob had given her—the Wheatsheaf Hotel, Penryll. She parked the car beside three or four others at the front of the building and stood, stretching and yawning, looking for the entrance.

'Hotel' seemed rather too grand for this small, friendly-looking place, she thought. It was old, as if two or three fishermen's cottages had been knocked into one, and lights shone from all the small, deep-set windows on the ground floor. From the two windows on the left, which were wide open to the road, there issued the unmistakable sounds of a public bar. No jukebox, thank goodness, simply the loud talk and rough laughter of the local folk enjoying their evening pint.

The next door bore the word 'Residents', and Anne pushed it open and blinked around. A steep flight of narrow stairs faced her and on her right was a door marked 'Residents' Lounge'. There was no sound from within. She opened the door and found herself in a small room with red velvet banquettes round the wall and three armchairs arranged round an ancient oak table. In one of the chairs sat Bob Riley, a glass of whisky beside him, his head drooping on his chest. His right arm was in plaster and supported by a sling. He looked the picture of misery.

'Hello, Bob,' Anne said brightly.

His head jerked up, his pleasant fair face lighting with a wide smile. 'Anne, angel—you made it. I'd begun to think you'd got stuck somewhere. Am I pleased to see you! Come here and let me give you a hug with my one good arm.' She went across to him and he gave her a delighted hug with his left arm. 'Forgive me for not getting up,' he said. 'Pull up a chair. Would you like something to eat or drink?'

She shook her head. 'I'm OK. I had some sandwiches at a service place on the motorway. Now, tell me what's going on. Where are the others?'

'They went down for a breath of sea air. The beach is just at the bottom of the hill. They'll be back soon.' He gave her a worried look. 'I hope we haven't brought you all this way in vain, Anne. I'm afraid things are not all plain sailing yet. Roger went to see this writer bloke—he's the subject of our film, by the way—a couple of hours ago, to tell him we were expecting a replacement and to check that we could still start tomorrow morning, as arranged. Roger didn't get much joy.

'He said Gardiner was in a black mood—something about a computer that had let him down—and he was making noises about not wasting his time pulling pretty faces in front of a camera until he'd got someone out to fix the computer, which, Roger gathered, was problematical. We're a long way from any technology centres. As there are ladies present, I've edited his language.'

Anne sat up. 'Gardiner? Is that his name?'

'That's the name he writes under—Francis Gardiner. I believe his real name is Rayne.'

Anne slumped back in her chair weakly. She supposed she might have guessed. Lady Brent had said his pen-name had something to do with gardens. And he himself had said he had three hundred miles to drive when he'd left her that morning. 'I believe I know him,' she said slowly. 'How about if I go along and try my hand at smoothing him down?'

Bob regarded her doubtfully. 'Are you sure you aren't too tired to beard the lion in his den?'

She smiled. 'I like lions. Nice cuddly things.'

Bob chuckled. 'The indomitable female! But won't you wait until the others come back and Roger can show you the way? It's tricky driving.'

'I'll manage,' she said. 'I'll go right away, before it gets really dark.' And, having found a cloakroom where she could freshen up and comb her gold curls into something like order, she was in her car again, driving back the way she had come.

An acute turn to the left, Bob had said, up a steep hill. She found the turning and changed into second gear as she saw the narrow lane rising up almost vertically between high banks. Hoping she wouldn't meet anything coming down the other way, she urged the Metro up and up, as if it were a horse racing for the finishing post.

She was beginning to wonder if she had come the wrong way when at last she saw the light from a cottage, half-smothered with shrubs, standing back from the lane. Anne drew in a breath of relief as she saw that a wide space beside the cottage had been cleared to accommodate cars. One car stood alone there and as she drew in beside it she gave a sigh of satisfaction. The last time she had seen that car had been when it had stood in front of her own house.

She switched off her engine, got out and gave her little car an encouraging pat on its white bonnet. 'Well done,' she said. 'Now, you cool down while I tackle the lion in his den.'

She pushed her way up the short path through a tangle of shrubs to the front door, which was half hidden by a curtain of trailing wisteria. Mr Mark Rayne—or Francis Gardiner—certainly didn't encourage visitors. Perhaps the cottage had once been a smugglers' hide-away. It seemed the perfect place to have one. She must ask him.

She stood quite still, trying to control the thumping of her heart and wishing now that she hadn't been so eager with her offer to approach

the formidable Mark Rayne. She had thought it would be less embarrassing this way than if she suddenly appeared with the team tomorrow morning, and she had to go through with it now. She drew in a breath and knocked briskly at the door. Nothing happened. She waited for some time and then knocked again, harder.

After a lengthy pause she heard footsteps inside and the door opened a little way—reluctantly, it seemed. A tall figure she immediately recognised as Mark Rayne appeared in the dim light of a low-power bulb. 'Yes?' he rapped out.

Anne had been wondering how to announce herself, and now she had a brainwave. Imitating his curt tone, she repeated his own words on the night of the wedding. 'Open the door, can't you? I'm not a burglar.'

'What the blazes—?' he burst out. Then he opened the door further and the light fell on her.

He stepped out and came close to her. 'Good God, the video girl. What are you doing here?'

'That,' said Anne, 'is not a very civil greeting. May I come in?'

She seemed to have rendered him speechless. He stood aside and she stepped into the hall. He came in after her and closed the door with his foot, staring at her.

'I'd like a word with you, Mr Rayne, if you're not too busy.'

'Of course,' he said stiffly. He threw open a door and switched on the light. Anne went in and glanced around with surprise. Whatever the cottage might look like from the outside it had never been a smugglers' hide-away. The room was large and comfortably furnished with sofas and easy chairs, and there were books everywhere—on the tables, in bookcases on the walls, on the floor. She sat down without being invited.

'Do you want a drink?' Mark Rayne said ungraciously.

'A cyanide cocktail, perhaps?' She was still hoping to get a smile out of him.

He glared down at her. 'What are you talking about?'

'Just a joke,' Anne said wearily, and gave it up. The man evidently had no sense of humour. 'Thank you; something long and cool, please. I've been driving most of the day.'

He went out to the kitchen and came back with a long glass of orange juice.

'Thank you,' she said again, taking a drink and putting the glass down. She met his eyes as he sat down in a chair opposite; he was looking at her in a way she didn't like at all. His expression was even more grim than she had seen it at the wedding, when he had ordered her to move her car. If the man was in such a black mood, his promise to do her a good turn, if ever she needed one, was not going to produce any sweetness and light.

He said brusquely, 'I can't imagine how you found me, or what you want, Miss—er—but I'm very busy at the moment so please come to the point.'

She was beginning to get very angry herself. Even if she had interrupted him in writing his *magnum opus* surely there was no excuse for this gratuitous rudeness? But she'd have to try her luck. She drew in a quick breath. 'When we parted you promised you'd repay one good turn with another, if I should ever need one. I've come to hold you to that promise.' She gave him what she hoped was a winning smile.

His eyes narrowed. He got to his feet. 'I think this conversation had better end. I'm sorry if your long drive has proved to be in vain, but I must ask you to leave now.'

She stared at him incredulously. Was the man really such a churlish oaf? She remained sitting where she was. 'But you don't know yet what I was going to ask you,' she said in a chilly voice.

He sneered, 'Go on, tell me. As if I couldn't guess.'

Horrors! Did he think she'd come chasing after him, presuming on a slight acquaintance? She felt the heat rising slowly into her cheeks, but somehow she managed to keep her poise.

'I was merely going to ask you to keep to your arrangement to give the interview tomorrow morning. I have driven from home, at Bob Riley's request, to stand in for him as camera operator. I think you know that Bob was injured this morning and isn't able to handle his camera. What did you think I was going to ask you?'

He stood before her, very tall and formidable, and she watched his expression slowly change. Then he sank into his chair again and buried his head in his hands, raking his fingers impatiently through his thick dark hair. She waited in silence. She had given up trying to guess what this man was thinking. Finally he sat up and shook his head ruefully. 'What is it about you, Miss Anne Grey? You always seem to catch me in a foul mood so that I make a bloody fool of myself. Do you do it on purpose?'

Anne drank the last of her orange juice. So he hadn't forgotten her name. That had been a calculated put- down. She supposed it was because he'd wanted to get rid of her quickly. Or was there something he wanted to hide? She smiled to herself at her sudden picture of Mark Rayne as a smuggler—although at the moment, in a faded

cotton shirt and ancient jeans, with his hair tousled and his chin dark with at least twenty-four hours' growth, he might have passed for one.

'What's the joke?' he enquired suspiciously.

'You are, Mr Rayne,' Anne told him coolly.

He got up and, taking her empty glass, poured her another fruit drink, this time laced with something stronger, and brought it back to her. 'Once again, a peace offering,' he said. 'I mustn't let it become a habit.' He went over and poured himself a large whisky. Then he came to his chair and looked straight into her eyes. 'I'm really sorry, Anne. All I can say in excuse is that I'm at the end of my tether, and anybody would have been unwelcome at that moment.'

'Roger, our director, said you were bothered about your computer.'

'Bothered!' He gave a hollow laugh. 'If you'd heard the language I've been hurling at the damn thing all day you might have some idea of my state of mind.'

'What's the trouble?' she asked. 'Maybe I could think of something. I've done a course in computing.'

'Can you bring the dead back to life? All the work I did yesterday has gone—died—disappeared from sight. It's the most damnably frustrating thing I've ever known. I've only had the machine two days. A fellow came from the suppliers in London to install it and show me the way to turn it on and off, which was really all I needed. I went through all the motions, exactly as he said but when I pressed the keys to bring back the work there was nothing. Just a blank screen.'

Anne nodded. 'I know that feeling. May I look at the computer? I won't promise anything, but there are one or two things I could try.'

He led her along a short passage to a small office at the back of the cottage, explaining as he went. 'My trusty old Remington finally expired, and I thought I'd try one of these wonderful inventions. They're supposed to do everything short of writing the book for you. They don't tell you that they can also lose your work most competently,' he added bitterly.

Anne sat down and examined the personal computer on the desk. When she switched it on, it took only a few moments to confirm that it was loaded with a word- processing system she knew well. She was very conscious of Mark Rayne standing close behind her. She could hear his breathing near to her ear as he leaned down to watch what she was doing, and his breath was warm on her cheek. She had a sudden, crazy idea that if she turned her head he would kiss her. Concentrate, you fool, she scolded herself, and turned her attention to the computer.

'What name did you give your document?' she asked.

'Name? Oh, yes, I called it "eleven" because it's chapter eleven. It's the last chapter but one of the book, and I promised faithfully to let the publishers have the finished manuscript by the end of the week. I thought I'd got it well in hand. I'd finished chapter eleven and only had one more chapter to write. Oh, I could rewrite all the work I've lost, I suppose. But what if it disappeared again?'

Anne said, 'I see your problem.' She soon found that the text had indeed disappeared from the screen. 'So you've lost the whole of chapter eleven?' she asked.

He grimaced. 'I wrote the first half by hand while I was waiting for the computer to be delivered, and that still exists, but the other half of the chapter, which I typed yesterday on this thing—' he indicated the computer with disgust '—has gone.'

She realised that he'd not had any proper training and thought impatiently that he had probably decided, in his lordly, masculine way, that word processing was simple— you just had to press a few keys and hey presto! the machine turned into a typewriter. 'What did you do when you'd finished work yesterday?' she asked him.

'Exactly what the fellow told me,' he said in a slightly pained voice. 'I was very careful to save it. I pushed in the little disk thing.'

Anne's hopes rose. She felt an odd sense of excitement. If he'd actually saved it to the back-up disk all might be well. She found the floppy disk under a pile of papers on the desk and pressed it into its slot. She brought up the list of documents on the back-up disk. Yes, 'eleven' was there. A minute later, as she retrieved it, the text appeared on the screen. 'Is this it?' She scrolled the text through to the end, where he had, presumably, finished for the day.

Behind her, Mark let out a yell of triumph. 'It's there! It's all beautifully there—like magic. Anne, you're a magician. Intelligent as well as lovely. What can I say?'

He put his hands on her shoulders and swivelled her round to face him. 'How can I thank you?' Before she knew what he intended to do he had bent his head and kissed her full on the mouth. His lips were cool and they lingered longer than was necessary for a thank-you kiss.

When he drew away they looked at each other for a long moment. Anne could feel the blood surging up into her-face. She turned her chair back, managing somehow to keep her voice reasonably steady as she said, 'That was a trifle premature. I've only managed to find the text on the floppy disk so far. I must copy it onto the hard disk before you begin to work with it again.'

He watched her hands with awe as the fingers danced over the keys. 'There you are—it's copied. Now,' she said, 'I'll show you how to exit from the work in future. I think that may have been where you went wrong.'

She went through the procedure she knew so well and told him what she was doing at every point and why. Then she switched off the computer and turned to look up at him. 'I really don't think you've had enough training,' she said. 'Can't you get your suppliers to lay on a couple of sessions? It would be well worthwhile.'

He shook his head dolefully. 'I rang them up but they can't do anything for at least a fortnight. Anyway, if I have to have training before I can get on with the work I'm certainly not going to meet the deadline at the end of the week.' He pulled up a chair and sank onto it, glaring at the machine, 'I wish to goodness I'd never bought the damn thing now.'

Anne tried to cheer him up. 'You'll love it when you feel really at home with it, but it does take a little time. I made all sorts of mistakes when I first started.'

He shook his head. 'And time is what I haven't got. There's nobody round here who can help me. I suppose...'

Suddenly he smiled—really smiled—and Anne felt quite dazzled. It was what she had been waiting for and it changed his whole face. With the lines of frustration and annoyance smoothed out he was devastatingly attractive. She felt a warm stirring somewhere inside her. She said weakly, 'Yes?'

He said, 'Look, Anne, if I go through with this interview tomorrow as meekly as a lamb, will you stay on for a few days and help me through to the end of the book? Or am I suggesting something impossible?'

The smile was still in place, pleading now, and she felt the full force of it. Danger loomed ahead. She found Mark Rayne overpoweringly disturbing, and she also knew that she could never compete with the glamorous Trudi. But she knew he was in a fix and that she could get him out of it. It would be unkind to refuse and her conscience would nag at her.

She said slowly, 'As a matter of fact I'd been thinking of staying on for a few days and having a little holiday by the sea, if the hotel can put me up. At least I should be in the neighbourhood if you needed me. Would that do?'

'That would do beautifully.' He was full of enthusiasm. 'Now, come and have another drink before you change your mind.'

Anne hung back. 'You know,' she said slowly, 'you've just given me an idea.'

'Tell me about it.' He hurried her back into the sitting room, his hand at her elbow, and propelled her to a corner of the sofa while he poured her a drink—this time in a small glass—and another whisky for himself. Then he came back to sit beside her on the sofa.

'Let's drink to our partnership and to your new idea. You haven't told me what it is.'

'Well...' she began, and stopped. If she explained she would have to tell Mark Rayne about her home circumstances, and he was still a stranger. She gave him a sideways look over the rim of her glass. 'I suppose we're friends now, aren't we?'

'Of course we are,' he said quickly, but she had a strange feeling that a wary look had come over his face. 'And a very good friend in need you are too,' he added.

That defined their relationship perfectly, she thought with amusement. She mustn't read anything into that kiss. Well, she didn't intend to, did she?

'And the new idea?' he said. 'Go on, tell me—I don't like mysteries unless I'm writing one.' He gave her an encouraging grin.

'Oh, it's nothing very thrilling, as I'm sure your books are. I just wondered if I could make a career out of training people who are new to word processing. I'm finding that my video work isn't enough to support me, and I'm not getting any commissions at present. I was unlucky enough to start just before everyone bought a camcorder, and now they all want to do it themselves.'

'You're a career girl, are you?' He gave her a keen glance. 'And how does the fiance view that?'

Oh, goodness, she'd forgotten that she was supposed to be engaged still. She hadn't wanted to explain why she was still wearing a ring when he'd drawn attention to it on the day of the wedding, and for some reason she didn't want to explain now. It would be a kind of protection against falling under a man's spell again as easily as she had fallen for Keith.

'We have an understanding,' she said vaguely.

'I see. Well, if my opinion's of any value, I think you'd make a great success of it. You're such a good teacher. You go slowly and explain clearly, and best of all you have a lovely voice—which is rare these days.'

She felt herself flush at his compliment. 'Thank you for those kind words, sir. I'll give the matter my serious consideration.' She put her glass down and got to her feet. 'That was a delightful drink.' She picked up her bag and turned to the door. 'It's time I left,' she said, 'while my head is still its normal size.'

Mark was beside her, opening the door. 'I'll drive you back,' he said. 'It's quite dark now and I want you all in one piece tomorrow. There's a farm higher up and you might meet a car or something. You can leave your car here and come up with your team in the morning.'

Anne didn't demur. The thought of meeting a tractor on that hill was horrifying^ 'Thank you, I'd appreciate that,' she said. 'And, as a matter of interest, what *do* you do if you meet anything in the dark on that terrifying hill?'

He smiled at her tone of apprehension. 'Oh, you simply back up to the top again,' he said, and she shuddered and said she'd walk up next time she visited him.

Laughing together like old friends, they went out to his car. Anne had stored her video equipment in the boot of the Metro and Mark assured her that it would be quite safe where it was. 'But I'll put it in the hall if you'd rather,' he offered. Anne agreed, and thanked him, and after he had transferred her travelling bag to his own car and she had locked up the Metro carefully Mark drove down the hill and back to the hotel without meeting anything on the way.

'That was a cheat,' she grumbled as he helped her out of the car. 'I was looking forward to a demonstration of your driving skill.'

He took her bag from the car and said solemnly, 'I'll arrange it better next time.'

There was a light over the residents' entrance. Mark opened the door and deposited Anne's bag inside. She said, 'I'll tell the team that you'll be ready for them at nine o'clock in the morning, shall I?'

'By all means. Tell them they have a golden-haired magician among their number. Goodnight, Anne.'

He took both her hands in his. Was he going to kiss her goodnight? She would never know, for she drew her hands away and said quickly, 'Goodnight, Mark. Thanks for the lift.' And, stepping inside the hall, she closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE rest of the team had evidently come back, for there was the sound of talk from inside the lounge. Anne stood in the dark passage until her breathing had quietened down to normal. She felt oddly excited, and she wasn't sure why. Nothing very extraordinary had happened in Mark Rayne's cottage, and yet—and yet it seemed as if her life had taken a turn into unknown territory. But she must put that behind her and get on with the job she had come down here to take on.

She opened the door of the lounge and stood there, smiling triumphantly at the expectant faces that were turned to her. 'Hello, everyone. I am the bearer of good news,' she announced.

Four voices began to talk at once. Over the babble Bob shouted, 'Shut up, you disorderly lot. Now, Anne, come in and meet the team. Team—this is Anne Grey. Now introduce yourselves.'

They all stood up—except Bob—and a very tall man with red hair and a thin, clever face held out his hand, saying, 'I'm Roger French. I do the directing and interviewing, and this is Toby, my assistant, who also looks after the lighting.' Toby looked about eighteen. He muttered, 'Hello,' and smiled shyly at her. Steve, who had greying hair and looked older than the others, introduced himself as 'audio', and Phihippa, who was the only girl of the party, cheerfully told Anne that she was the one who kept the show on the road.

She wore green trousers and a cerise T-shirt. With her small, darting eyes and her pert little nose she looked capable of doing just that, Anne thought, liking her vitality and her keenness. Philippa gave up the chair she had been sitting on and went to sit next to Toby on the banquette. He looked delighted.

Anne thanked her and sat down next to Bob as he said, 'Now, tell us all about the good news.'

'It's just that Mark Rayne is quite happy for us to start at nine tomorrow morning, and will co-operate in any way he can.'

Roger gave her a look of amazement. 'How on earth did you manage that? When I tackled him he almost went up in smoke.' He gave a dry laugh and added, 'I won't go into details about his language.'

'You needn't tell me,' Anne said ruefully. 'I know the man. But I found out that he was in a rage of frustration about his new word processor and I managed to help him out of the muddle. After that it was plain sailing.'

Roger glanced at Bob. 'You've got yourself a very talented young lady here,' he said with a grin. 'We ought to celebrate.'

Philippa spoke up. 'I've persuaded the good Mrs Yeo to make us a large pot of tea.' She looked round and added severely, 'You men have had enough beer for tonight.'

Steve groaned that she bullied them, but when the landlord's wife brought in tea on a huge tray with biscuits on a plate they all seemed to enjoy it. As they drank the tea they talked shop and discussed tomorrow's programme.

Anne said, 'Bob, I forgot to ask you—do you want me to use my own camera or will you trust me with yours?'

'I'd trust you with my life,' Bob told her fulsomely. Roger fetched Bob's camera and he went through the controls with her. She found that it wasn't very different from her own, smaller camera, and soon felt that she could handle it.

'It's a super camera,' she told Bob admiringly. As she glanced up at him she saw that he looked tired out. 'And now everything's settled I think you should go to bed and get some rest.'

Roger said, 'I've been trying to get him to go to bed for the last hour, Anne, but he would wait until you came back.' He helped Bob out of his chair and upstairs.

Philippa said, 'There are only three bedrooms in this very modest hostelry, so you and I will be sharing. Do you mind? Have you got your bag? Come upstairs and I'll show you.'

The bedroom was simple and very clean, with two single beds, a dressing table, a washbasin and a large, old-fashioned wardrobe. Philippa's clothes were tossed down on one of the beds and Anne took possession of the other one.

'The beds are very comfy—I sampled mine last night,' Philippa said. 'We arrived here yesterday afternoon- Roger wanted to get the feel of the place and find some good spots for background shots. This morning we went down to the sea, and that's when Bob hurt his wrist. He was climbing over some rocks to get a good position to take a shot of the cliffs and the hills behind and he slipped and fell onto his arm. I think he was trying to save his camera from falling. The camera was OK but he'd twisted his wrist and it was very painful.

' We got him to hospital and they X-rayed his arm and found that the wrist was broken. By the time he was bandaged up half the day had gone. None of the rest of us can use a camera properly and it looked as if we'd have to give up the whole thing. It's one of a series we're making on crime writers, you know, and Bob is banking on it to build up our reputation.

'We were all horribly disappointed but then Bob thought he'd get in touch with you. You know the rest and it's all worked out splendidly—especially as you know this writer man. He seems rather a pain from what Roger said.'

'I think you'll find him quite easy tomorrow. Let's hope so.' Anne smiled wearily. 'I think I'll turn in now; it's been a long day.'

'OK,' Philippa said cheerily. 'I'll be as quiet as a mouse when I come up. The bathroom's next door, by the way.'

When she had gone, Anne undressed, put on a cotton nightgown and went to find the bathroom. There was no shower, but the water was pleasantly hot and she had a long soak in the bath to iron out the ache in her muscles after all the driving.

She would be as good as new tomorrow, she told herself as she got into bed. She felt quite stupid with tiredness now, but as she drifted off to sleep she pondered for a moment on the strange way things happened. Last night she'd gone to bed with only a visit to the estate agent to look forward to, whereas tonight she had all the excitement of a quite unexpected professional job to think about.

She wasn't thinking about the job, though, when she finally went off to sleep. She was thinking, with a little thrill, that she would be with Mark all day.

Anne woke to see Philippa standing beside the bed with two cups of tea on a tray. 'I don't know about you, Anne,' she said, 'but I can't get started without my morning tea. Mrs Yeo's a good soul; she lets me use her kitchen to make it.'

Anne sat up, blinking herself awake, and took a gulp of tea. 'Thanks, Philippa, this is a lovely surprise. I can see why you keep the show on the road.'

Philippa grinned. 'Nice that somebody appreciates my efforts. Now, I'd better go and see if the men are ready for breakfast. We're timed to leave at a quarter to nine.'

Anne put down her cup and slid out of bed. 'How's Bob this morning?'

Philippa pulled a face. 'Like most men when they're injured. He says he feels fine and wants to get up. We've persuaded him to rest in bed and Roger is taking his breakfast up. Mrs Yeo has promised to look after him while we're out. Come down when you're ready.' She hurried away.

Anne washed hastily and then pulled the clothes she had brought with her out of her bag. She had come prepared for a short holiday, if it could be arranged, and had three light dresses as well as jeans and tops. She had also rolled up a large towel with a swimsuit and a bottle of oil inside it and put it on the back seat with a mac and walking shoes. Even if it turned out to be only a couple of days by the sea she was determined to make the most of it.

She pulled on a pair of newly washed jeans and a thin white top, and slipped her feet into sandals. She tied her hair-back firmly, as she always did when she was working. That had been the way Mark had first seen her—hair scraped back and glasses perched on her nose. No glasses now, thank goodness. She put in the contact lenses, going carefully through the routine, and stood thoughtfully before the mirror. Then, with a quick gesture, she pulled off the ribbon and let her golden curls riot round her small face. With a feeling of lightness and zest, she ran down the stairs to find the dining room.

Philippa was there already, arranging cups and saucers down the long table which almost filled the small room. 'Come and sit down,' she said. 'Breakfast's on its way.'

Roger came in then, followed by the other two men, and everyone sat down. Mrs Yeo appeared, bearing a huge pot of coffee in one hand and a jug of milk in the other. She was a large, motherly woman with an air of good sense about her. 'Was the breakfast all right for the poor gentleman?' she enquired of Roger.

He assured her that it had been fine and she said, 'Tell him to please himself what he does. I can give him a bit of lunch. If he gets up he can sit outside. There's a nice bit of lawn at the back and he can lie in the sun. Now, I'll have your breakfast here in no time.' She bustled out, to return about five minutes later with plates of bacon, egg and mushroom and a plentiful supply of toast, yellow farmhouse butter and a jar of home-made marmalade.

The team tucked in with gusto, but Anne noticed that there was tension in the air. She felt it herself. They were all anxious that the day should go well after such an inauspicious start yesterday.

Roger explained the programme to her. 'We'll find the best place inside the cottage for the first part of the interview,' he said. 'Then we can take some shots of the writer outside—somewhere that seems best. As you know, we've already taken some shots of the scenic bits—the beach and the cliffs and so on. That's what we were doing when Bob had his fall. I think it will all go smoothly, but ask me anything you're not sure about.'

Anne grimaced ruefully. 'I will indeed. It's my first time working with a team. I've only done weddings and solo jobs before, but I'll do my best. I just hope I won't let you down.'

Roger shook his head, smiling. 'You won't,' he promised, and she gave him a grin of thanks.

After breakfast she found Mrs Yeo and booked her room until the Weekend. There was a large party expected on Sunday, and all the rooms would be wanted then. Anne thanked her, glowing with pleasant anticipation. This meant that she would have her little holiday by the sea, even if Mark didn't need her again. But as she went to join the others, who were checking their gear and climbing into two cars, she smiled secretly, feeling sure that he *would* need her.

She sat beside Roger in his car. Steve was driving a Range Rover, with all the equipment inside and also Toby and Philippa, who were laughing happily together. The two powerful vehicles made nothing of the hill which had filled Anne with apprehension last night. 'I've left my car at the cottage,' she confessed. 'I was too chicken to drive down the hill in the dark in case I met something coming up. Mark offered to give me a lift back to the hotel.'

Roger chuckled, giving her a sideways glance. 'That's your story, is it?' He was teasing, of course, but she felt her cheeks go warm.

'That,' she told him with dignity, 'is the truth.' But he went on chuckling.

Mark must have heard them arriving, for he came out to the parking place as they were unloading their gear. Roger introduced him to Philippa, Steve and Toby. 'And I think you know Anne already,' he finished.

Mark gave Anne a look that she couldn't interpret. 'Oh, yes, I certainly do. We're great friends, aren't we, Annie?' His lips twisted wryly. For a moment she felt lost, then she realised that this was his way of asking her to forget his past blunders and accept him as a friend.

She smiled happily at him. 'Yes, of course we are,' she said, and saw his nod of satisfaction. They were talking in lovers' shorthand. Well, they weren't lovers, but at least his words seemed to establish a private understanding between them. Understanding? Why, she knew nothing about the man—except that he had a beautiful fiancée and that he was obsessed with her. Perhaps that explained his behaviour at the cottage last night. If Trudi turned up and found a girl there with him it would cause trouble.

'Anne, will you come with us, please?' Roger was speaking to her, and with a little start she dragged her thoughts back to what she was doing.

Leaving the others to unload the gear, Roger and Anne went into the cottage with Mark to decide on the best place to record the interview. The office, Roger said immediately, was too small. With six people in it, on a hot day, it would be like an oven.

Mark took them outside to the back of the cottage and Anne gasped with pleasure as they went through the door. Over a low hedge the land sloped gently down across rolling green turf to the edge of the cliff, after which there was nothing but endless sea all around, sparkling blue under a paler blue sky. A few gulls wheeled about lazily, complaining about the scarcity of fish.

'It's lovely out here.' She looked up at Roger. 'Will this do if we bring chairs out?'

But Roger shook his head and said that the interview itself should be conducted inside. 'But we could do some upper shots out here this afternoon. Perhaps we could get you walking along the cliff, Mr Rayne. Would you agree to that?' 'Certainly,' Mark said. 'Just so long as you don't show any landmarks that are immediately recognisable. I wouldn't want the place pointed out as the perfect holiday resort.'

Roger looked around at the green solitude of the cliffs. 'Understood.' He nodded. 'I'd feel like that myself if the cottage were mine.'

Finally they agreed on the sitting room. 'Lots of books.' Roger looked along the shelves with interest. 'There don't seem to be any of yours here, Mr Rayne.'

'These are the ones I read,' Mark told him with a grin.

'OK, but I've come to talk to you about your own books,' Roger told him. 'May we have some on the table here?'

'Seems like advertising,' Mark grumbled, but he went into the office and returned with four or five volumes.

'Good! Bear with me another moment.' Roger looked around the room critically. 'We'll both sit on the sofa to talk,' he said. 'It's a bit of a cliché, but the face-to-face interview on two chairs is even worse.'

They all agreed, and Anne thought that they were getting off to a good start. When the others came to set up the equipment everything began to take shape. Mark retired to his study, saying that he would be there when he was wanted.

Anne enjoyed working with a team. All the decisions about the light and sound were made by someone else, and all she had to do was follow Roger's direction. When Mark returned and the interview began she was able to watch his face through the lens of the camera—his stern, inscrutable face, where only the lift of the dark brows, the twitch at the corners of the sensitive mouth gave any hint of what he was thinking or feeling.

Roger's questions were all about his writing, leading on to his methods of working. What time did he find the most productive to do his writing?

'All day and most of the night when things are going well,' Mark smiled in reply.

And what was his favourite writing implement? Pen—typewriter—word processor?

Anne saw Mark's eyes move almost imperceptibly in her direction. 'Well,' he drawled, 'if it weren't for the time factor I'd say quill pen on parchment, but I have to admit that I've moved into the electronic age

and recently bought a word processor. We didn't hit it off very well at first, but fortunately I've found myself a wonderful teacher.'

His expression hadn't changed but Anne caught Roger's grin as he said, 'That's the most important thing,' and she knew the way his mind was working.

It had been arranged that they would have a break for coffee during the morning session, and out of the corner of her eye Anne saw Philippa's figure in the doorway, miming silently that it was ready.

Roger had started on his last question. 'You have a splendid hide-away here, Mr Rayne. Do you find it necessary to have some place where you can get away to write? To escape the distractions of a family, perhaps?'

Mark's face hardened suddenly and his voice was icy as he replied, 'I have no wish to discuss my private life.'

'Cut,' snapped Roger to Anne, and she obeyed. She took her eye from the viewfinder. Oh, dear, was Mark going to stage one of his nasty tempers? But he evidently had himself under control, for he simply got to his feet and stalked out of the room.

There was a horrified *silence*. Then Roger made a helpless gesture towards Anne. 'What did I say that was so terrible?'

She shook her head. 'I'll take him some coffee and try to lower the temperature,' she said, taking a mug from the tray that Philippa was holding.

She found Mark in the garden, striding up and down like a caged animal. 'Coffee?' she said, handing him the mug.

For an awful moment she thought he might throw the contents of the mug over her, then he muttered, 'Thanks,' and tossed down a gulp of

hot coffee, which she was sure must have scalded his mouth. If it had he made no sign. He burst out, 'I told my agent particularly that I'd only do this interview on the understanding that it wouldn't be turned into a psychological investigation. I made a point of it.' He sounded furious.

He drank the rest of the coffee and Anne took the mug from him. 'These damned journalists are all the same. They want to snoop into your private life and serve all the details up to the public. Well, I'm not standing for it, so that's that—' he kicked a stone viciously '—and you can tell your director so.'

He strode away from her down the cliff towards the sea. Anne put the mug down on the grass and followed him. If they were friends then this was the time to tell him the truth. She caught up with him as he reached the edge of the cliff and they stood silently side by side, looking out at the empty vista of sea all around.

'There was no need to fly into a rage,' she said quietly. 'You only had to tell Roger what you didn't want to talk about and he would have respected your wishes. He doesn't work for one of the lurid tabloids, you know. The question didn't seem unusual, I think most people like to be given the opportunity of talking about their private lives.' She added thoughtfully, 'I always wonder how they can, but perhaps I'm an introvert.'

He turned to her. 'That makes two of us,' he said, and she was thankful to see a quirk of humour touch his lips. 'You're a realist, Anne. For one so young it's quite amazing that you can put things into perspective. Come on, let's go back.' He linked his arm with hers and they walked back to the sitting room.

Mark went straight up to Roger. 'Sorry about the prima donna act, chum. I'm ready for the next session when you are.'

'Good,' Roger said crisply. 'Let's get on, then.'

The remainder of the interview went smoothly. Roger kept to the subject of books and the two men discovered views in common. They chatted easily about bookstores and libraries and foreign translations, and Mark even went as far as disclosing a hint about the subject of his forthcoming book. Anne was fascinated to see, through the lens of her camera, the animated expression on his face as he discussed something of real interest to him. How had she ever thought him inscrutable?

'And now, to conclude,' Roger said, 'I've heard it said that you write so well that it's a pity you concentrate on what are called "category" novels. Has it ever occurred to you to write the kind of book that brings critical acclaim?'

Mark grinned. 'My fans supply me with all the acclaim my ego will stand. Also,' he added with a decided twinkle in his eyes, 'crime pays so well.'

'Cut,' Roger directed Anne, and, turning to Mark, said, 'That was a gem of a punchline, Mr Rayne. You've done my job for me. I needn't add anything to it.' He looked round the room. 'Break for lunch, everyone,' he said. 'Philippa has found a small cafe near the beach. We'd like it if you'd join us, Mr Rayne.'

Mark excused himself, saying that he had some bits and pieces of work to finish.

Roger nodded. 'OK, then. We'll be back about two to take the outside shots.'

The team all piled into Roger's car and drove down the hill towards the beach. They stopped at the hotel on the way, to see Bob and give him news of the morning's work. They found him in the back garden, sitting at a table under a large red umbrella. He brushed away

enquiries about his wrist and wanted to know how the session had gone.

Roger reassured him that everything had gone along splendidly and that when they had finished taking the outside shots this afternoon they would be able to make a good half-hour feature. 'Rayne's an interesting bloke; he gave me a lot of info about the world of the bestseller.'

Bob asked Anne how she had got along and Roger answered for her. 'She got along splendidly. She did everything I asked of her, and—' he gave a sly glance towards her '—quite a lot I didn't. In fact, we couldn't have managed without her.'

Anne told Bob to ignore such fulsome flattery, but she knew that he was pleased and relieved. He must have been worrying, she was sure, about having to bring a comparative stranger in to take his place on the team. After setting Bob's mind at rest, they left him looking much more cheerful and set out to find the cafe.

At the bottom of the hill the road ended, widening out into a square, and there was the beach and the sea before them. The cafe was on the right, with one or two small shops, and on the left was a post office. Straight ahead was a very small car park enclosed by a railing, beside which steps led down to a sandy beach where cliffs, rising on either side, formed a sheltered harbour.

Roger eased the car into the only vacant space in the car park and Anne got out and looked around with delight. This was the perfect place to spend a holiday. She pictured herself swimming in the sparkling blue water, lying on the warm sand, relaxing and forgetting all her worries for just a few days. Somewhere in the picture Mark Rayne's tall form and dark, disturbing eyes appeared, but she reminded herself that he was engaged to Trudi King, the beautiful

model she had seen in the photograph. She recalled the adoration in his face as he had looked down at his beloved.

Yes, Anne decided, it would be far safer if he didn't need her help again. She would be a fool to indulge in a schoolgirl crush on the man. She didn't dare analyse her feelings, but she knew how easy it would be to imagine herself in love with him—and how fatal. At this moment she was ready only to enjoy her lunch, and she followed the others into the cafe.

Anne shared a table with Roger and Steve while Philippa and Toby giggled together at a separate table in a corner. It was a pretty little cafe, and was run, as they found out, by two sisters. It seemed all of a piece with the small, sandy cove and the sunshine, and the toddlers who padded around, leaving a trail of sand on the floor. She could well understand how Mark didn't want this place to get too well known. If it were to sprout blocks of flats and encourage hordes of visitors it would completely lose its charm.

They ate a delicious lobster salad, with freshly baked rolls and butter, followed by lemon ice-cream and helped down with a bottle of white wine. Afterwards, feeling happily replete, they walked across the sand to the edge of the tide and Philippa took off her sandals and paddled. It was all so friendly and jolly, working as part of a team, and Anne was getting to know them all. She hated the thought of saying goodbye to them tomorrow and being left all alone again. But she wouldn't dwell on that now.

Back at the cottage, the afternoon session went smoothly. Anne mastered the trick of walking backwards in front of Mark as he strolled along the springy green turf of the cliff, with Steve on his other side, holding the microphone. Mark was at his most amiable and Roger was careful to avoid any personal questions.

When, finally, he declared himself satisfied, he thanked Mark for his co-operation, the equipment was packed up in the Range Rover and, with promises to keep in touch and to let Mark have a copy of the video of the uncut material, the cars started off down the hill.

Anne was the last to leave, in her Metro. 'Do you have to leave now?' Mark asked her as she climbed into the car. 'I rather thought we might have supper together.'

'Thank you, but I must go with the others,' she said. 'There'll be things to be discussed. But I've fixed up to stay until the weekend, so if you need more help with the computer you'll probably find me sunbathing on the beach.'

That, she thought, would dispel any hint that she was unduly eager for his company, and emphasise the fact that their relationship was purely professional. 'I'll be leaving on Saturday,' she added, 'and I'll call in and say goodbye if I don't see you before.' She didn't look at him -as she spoke. If she'd seen the expression on his face she might have been surprised.

She turned the key and the Metro responded.

'Au revoir, then,' Mark said as, with a cheerful smile, she lifted a hand in salute and followed the two cars down the hill.

Back at the hotel the others were talking over plans in the residents' lounge, having found that Bob was resting on his bed.

Roger said, 'It's only just after four. If you're all agreeable I suggest that we start off now and break the journey at Bristol. It should be easy to find rooms for the night there. It won't be so tiring for Bob as taking the whole drive tomorrow without a stop. What do you think?'

'Good idea,' said Steve, and Philippa and Toby both agreed.

Roger looked at Anne. 'What about you, Anne? You'll be going home, I suppose, so our ways will part. We're based in London, by the way.'

'I've decided to stay on here for a few days,' she said brightly. 'I'm due for some holiday and the weather's so lovely and—' She stopped. Why was she going on explaining?

'Good idea,' said Roger, giving her a knowing look which, to her confusion, brought the pink colour into her cheeks.

Everything went according to plan, and Anne saw them off half an hour later. She was overwhelmed by their thanks for helping them out. 'You've been super,' Bob told her, kissing her heartily. 'We'll let you know when we start on the editing and perhaps you'd like to come to our studio and take part. Next week, probably. We'll be posting you a cheque, and of course your hotel bill is settled until tomorrow.'

Roger helped him into the car and saw that he was comfortable and then, with a chorus of goodbyes and much waving of hands out of windows, the cars set off up the hill out of the village.

Anne waved until the cars were out of sight. Then she went slowly back into the hotel and up to her room. She sat down on the bed. Suddenly everything seemed flat now that the team had left. She was alone again and she wished, with a curious emptiness, that she had accepted Mark's invitation to have supper with him. She had to admit that she wanted to see him again with an urgency that was unusual.

Stop it, she ordered herself. He's not for you. She refused to moon about building a dream that wouldn't come true. A good brisk walk was what she needed. Then she would come back, wash and change and go down to the little cafe for a light meal. She'd go to bed early

and be up early tomorrow. That way she would squeeze every moment out of her unexpected holiday.

She would definitely think no more about Mark Rayne unless—or until—he came to ask for her help.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANNE curled her toes in the warm sand and, putting on a pair of enormous sunglasses, lay back on the large towel, spreading out her hair to dry in the hot afternoon sun. There were very few people around; the schools had not yet broken up and most of the children were toddlers. It was very quiet—only the lazy splash of the waves, the thin cry of sea birds and the chatter of the children.

Perfect, Anne thought, and her swim had been perfect too. The water had been bracingly cold, but once she had swum out as far as she'd dared—she was out of practice—she had begun to warm up, and lying back and letting the rise and fall of the water rock her in a sensuous rhythm before she'd swum back again had been blissful.

She was really enjoying this afternoon, she told herself with satisfaction. She had completely spoiled the morning for herself, because she hadn't been able to help looking around every two minutes, hoping to see Mark Rayne's tall figure coming towards her across the sand. He hadn't come, and by the time she'd gone up to the cafe for lunch she'd been feeling disappointed and annoyed with herself.

As she'd eaten lobster salad she had argued the matter out with herself. Mark had said that she was a realist, hadn't he? And a realist didn't live on dreams but on facts, and the fact was that Mark was engaged to marry a gorgeous model and she herself was someone who had been useful to him; that was all. Making a firm resolve to keep that in mind, she had found a historical paperback novel in the post office, where you could buy most things, from picture postcards to water-wings, and had sat in the shade of a high rock and settled down to read.

Fortunately the book was interesting, and she hadn't had to exert too much self-control to stop herself from searching the beach, even

once, for Mark. After a couple of hours the sun had come round the rock and had been shining full on her, so she'd given up the book and decided to have a swim. And now here she was, spread out to dry, so to speak, and feeling quite pleased with life and with herself for not letting silly romantic dreams spoil her afternoon.

The sun was really hot now. She must be careful not to let herself burn. Ten minutes, that was all, then she'd cover up. She sat up and oiled her legs and arms thoroughly, struggling to reach down as far as the low-cut back of her one-piece swimsuit, but in spite of all the twisting and turning she had to decide that it was hopeless. She'd just have to be careful not to expose her back to the sun.

'Need any help?' Mark's amused voice said from behind her.

Anne's head jerked round. 'Oh, you—you startled me. I wasn't expecting...'

'So it seems.' Mark took the bottle of oil from her raised hand, where it was tilting dangerously and had already deposited a pool of oil on her shoulder. She fumbled in her bag for a tissue.

'Keep still,' he ordered, screwing the top onto the bottle. 'You were trying to anoint your back, I suppose?'

'Allow me.' He began to spread out the little puddle with his fingers.

Anne groped for something witty and amusing to say, but her mouth had gone dry and her heart was behaving rather oddly.

'Turn over on your front,' he said. 'I can't get at you while you're sitting up.'

Obediently she wriggled round and lay on her stomach while his warm hands stroked the oil into her back, moving rhythmically up and down her spine. 'I don't think much of this garment for

sunbathing,' he remarked. 'It covers up far too much. You'll have a line right across your back.'

Anne twisted away from him and sat up. She couldn't take any more of this. Even though he was being very matter-of-fact about it, his touch was stirring sensations that were new to her and a little alarming. 'That's fine,' she said. 'Thank you. As a matter of fact I wasn't going to do any more sunbathing. I was going up to have a cup of tea in the cafe. And nobody's going to see the line across my back.'

'No? Pity!' His tone was teasing. 'OK, I'll treat you to tea, and then I can explain why I'm here.'

She slipped her sundress over the swimsuit, which was almost dry by now. She rolled up the towel, pulled on her sandals and together they strolled across the sand towards the cafe.

'You want my help with your book, I suppose?'

His dark brows lifted as he glanced quickly at her. 'You *did* offer,' he reminded her.

She bit her lip. She'd been so determined not to sound too eager to be with him that she'd ended up sounding ungracious. She must be careful about that. She laughed lightly. 'Of course I did, and I meant it. It's just that I'm not really dressed for a secretarial job. I'll go up to the hotel to tidy myself when I've had a reviving cup of tea.'

'I have a better idea than that.' Mark linked an arm with hers and guided her towards his Jaguar, which was, she saw, parked a short way up the road. 'We'll call at the hotel and you can pick up the things you need, then I'll drive you up to the cottage, where you can have a shower while I put the kettle on. I've got a large fruitcake which I certainly can't eat all by myself.'

Again the touch of his fingers on her bare arm was sending messages to her nerve-endings. This man is dangerously magnetic, the messages said. She'd never before met a man who could so easily stir her senses without anything more than a friendly gesture. He was one of those men who exuded sexuality quite effortlessly. Heaven help any girl if he really made her a target, she thought, trying to see something amusing in the idea.

Before switching on the engine, Mark said, 'I've got a confession to make. When you offered to help me you must have thought that it would be merely to push a few keys and put things right, as you did yesterday. But I'm afraid that won't be enough.' He rested a hand on the wheel and turned to look at her as he went on, 'I typed the last half of chapter eleven onto the screen last night before I went to bed—around two o'clock. This morning I planned to print what I had done, then do all the necessary revisions and alterations and transfer them to the screen.

'But when I came to work on the screen today I got into a frightful muddle. I spent two hours this morning trying to clean up just one page, and even now I'm afraid it's far from perfect. If I'm going to get the book finished by Friday night the only way is to ask for your help—far more hours than you expected to give me. I realise that I shall be encroaching on your holiday, and I'll fix up something for you later, but—will you do it, Annie? Work with me for the time it takes? It's up to you.'

The magnetic dark eyes were fixed hopefully, pleadingly on her. They would have melted any resistance she felt. But she didn't want to resist. All she felt was pleasure and a kind of excitement at the thought of helping him. She said, 'Certainly I'll do what I can. It will be good experience for me—a new kind of job—and I'll find it fascinating.'

'Splendid! You're my good angel, Annie.'

She shook her head. She mustn't forget that he had called her a realist. 'No angel, I'm afraid. It's just plain common sense. And I'm not terribly addicted to lying on the beach. I'd rather have something to do.' She had, she congratulated herself, dealt with the situation rather well.

When they arrived at the cottage, Mark took Anne upstairs, leading the way along a short passage to the bathroom at the end of it. On the way she glanced in at the two rooms, one large, one smaller, which were obviously the only bedrooms in the cottage. Mark threw open the bathroom door and glanced inside to check that there were plenty of towels. He explained the somewhat complicated shower, then left her.

The bathroom was modern and luxurious, tiled in pale sea-green, with a large bath as well as the shower and a vanity table furnished with expensive toiletries in pots and bottles—most of which were undoubtedly designed for female use. Trudi, thought Anne, and was shocked by a quick stab of jealousy. Of course the girl would stay here with Mark; the only blessing was that she didn't seem to be here at present.

Anne had a refreshing shower and washed the salt water out of her hair. There would probably be a dryer in one of the bedrooms, but she wasn't going to explore them so she towelled it as dry as she could and let it fall in a heavy, curling golden mass past her shoulders.

She zipped open the bag she had brought from the hotel and put on clean underclothes and a silky blue sundress. She took her contact lenses from their tiny case, where she had put them before her swim, and slipped them into place. After a moment's thought she pulled on the light matching jacket, which covered her up modestly. She wasn't going to give Mark any excuse for teasing her, however harmless.

There was a resolute twist to her mouth, as she went down to join him in the sitting room.

He had set a tray with tea and a huge cake on the low table beside the sofa, and was lounging back where he had sat for the interview.

'Here I am, all ready for work,' Anne announced, trying to strike the right note from the beginning- friendly but professional. She looked round for a chair but there wasn't one near the table, so she had to sit next to Mark on the sofa. She sat down as far away from him as possible.

Mark grinned at her and she had an idea that he knew she "was putting on something of an act. He said, 'Will you pour out? I'm as clumsy with a teapot as I am with a computer.'

The tray was immediately in front of him, so that if she wanted to reach the pot she would either have to pull the table towards her or move very close to him. She shot a glance at him and saw the wicked gleam in his eye. This was a deliberate challenge and she decided to ignore it.

She slid along the sofa until she was within reach of the teatray. This, inevitably, brought her very close to Mark. When she leaned forward to pour out the tea her knee was touching his thigh; she could feel the heat of his body through the linen of his trousers. She pushed a cup towards him and, picking up her own, went to move back along the sofa.

'Thanks,' he said. He was laughing at her now. 'Don't go too far away again.'

She glared at him. 'You arranged that on purpose, didn't you?' Her cup was balancing unsteadily on its saucer and she put it down.

'Certainly,' he admitted shamelessly. 'I detected a thin film of ice and thought it better to thaw it from the very beginning of our work together. Please don't think of yourself as a sort of super-secretary, Annie, all starch and efficiency. I want us to work as friends and partners. So I wanted to get a little closer to you from the start.'

Anne couldn't help laughing now. 'OK,' she agreed. 'But—*how* close?'

His hand measured the distance between them. 'That much?'

Anne's eyes were dancing. She hadn't thought that Mark Rayne could actually be fun. She was going to enjoy working with him. She picked up her cup of tea again, but she didn't move any further away.

'Seriously,' Mark added, 'you're alone here with me and I wanted to make it clear that you don't need to put up a barrier. I promise I'm not going to make a pass at you. I won't forget that you have a fiance.'

'Or that you have?' 'Quite.' He cut two large pieces of cake and laid them carefully on two plates. He handed her one. 'There,' he said. 'I didn't drop a crumb.'

Anne took the plate, wondering why he had changed the subject so abruptly. What if she admitted that the ring on her finger meant nothing? She remembered only too well the contemptuous look he'd given her when she had arrived at the cottage on Monday night and he had mistaken her intention. Oh, no, she must keep up the fiction of a fiance, whatever happened. She would die with humiliation if he thought she was developing a crush on him.

When they went through to the office, Anne admitted that the work was in rather a muddle. But there was nothing that couldn't be sorted out. In half an hour she'd devised a working method which Mark called the 'Gardiner-Grey assembly line'. Anne printed everything that he had already typed onto the screen, then he took the script page

by page, altering and revising, and passed each page, as he finished it, to Anne, who made the necessary alterations onto the screen.

The method worked perfectly. Anne had never imagined that she could enjoy what was really routine work so much, but she found that she was loving every minute of it. Working with Mark was a joy. There was no sign of the irritable temper that she knew he could display when things were not going right.

Sometimes, when she was waiting for the next page, she was able to sit back and watch him as he concentrated on the work, his pen hovering over the printed page, slashing here, interpolating something there. He hesitated now and again, deep in thought, two deep creases between his dark eyebrows, sometimes leaning back to fix his gaze on the ceiling or chewing the end of his pen. Once or twice he gave her a quick smile as he handed over a page. She smiled back, feeling a warm pleasure in the knowledge that she was helping him and he was valuing her.

At eight o'clock Mark called a halt. 'I'll tell you what we're going to do,' he announced. 'We're going to find a snack of some sort in the fridge, then I'm going to drive you back to your hotel and come back and get busy on typing as much as I can keep awake to do for us to work on tomorrow. May I introduce you to my kitchen?'

The kitchen was rather like her kitchen at home, though smaller. There was certainly no gleaming modern equipment to be seen. No dishwasher, no mixer, no microwave. There was an old-fashioned sink with a wooden draining board, and a table instead of the usual Formica- topped work surfaces.

'I expect I look a little primitive,' Mark said, opening the door of an enormous, rather ancient fridge. 'As you've probably gathered, I'm not very well up on the latest technology. I scrub everything down

once a week, keep the fridge filled up, shake the rugs and that suits me fine.

'The kitchen in my London flat positively bristles with gadgets—provided by the firm which built the block, to entice buyers. I can use the toaster but that's about all. So when I come down here to work I enjoy getting away from technology. Why I let myself be persuaded to buy a word processor, I still don't know.' He turned his attention to the fridge.

It was certainly well stocked, and together they prepared ham sandwiches with lettuce and cherry tomatoes, followed by bowls of strawberries. Mark made coffee while Anne carried the food into the sitting room and they sat down side by side companionably on the sofa, discussing the evening's work as they ate supper and making plans for the next day. It was arranged that he would call for her in the morning. 'If you're not at the hotel I'll look for you on the beach, OK?'

As soon as they had finished supper he lost no time in driving Anne back to the hotel. 'Sorry to leave you so early in the evening, but I must get on with the writing.' He was alight with enthusiasm. 'To find that I'll be able to meet the deadline when I'd given up hope- it's been like a shot in the arm.'

Anne said, 'I can't wait to see how the book ends. I've only got a vague idea of the story, but it certainly has that can't-put-it-down quality.'

'Bless you for those kind words.' Mark smiled at her in the shadows outside the residents' entrance. 'In fact, bless you for everything. When I say I couldn't have managed without you, I mean it literally. At the risk of becoming a bore, I can only say thank you once again.' He put his hands on her shoulders. 'Goodnight, little girl. Sleep well.' He bent his head and kissed her gently on the lips. 'Your fiance can spare me that, I'm sure.'

She tried to say goodnight when he released her, but the word wouldn't come and he had got back into his car and driven away before she could even open the door and let herself in to the hotel.

Sleep well! Did he really expect her to? Or did he have no idea of the effect his kiss had had on her? Anne asked herself these questions as she went up to her room, pulled on a warm jumper and walked down the hill to the sea. Mark had said to her, 'I don't like mysteries', but he was a complete mystery himself—at least to her. She had heard it said that work always came first with a writer- was the most important thing in his life. And perhaps that explained something about Mark. She wondered whether the same could be said of women writers, but doubted if women could ever feel as free as men. Too many things pulled at them, emotional as well as practical.

There were no cars in the small car park and Anne leaned on the rail and gazed out over the sea. The tide was high and she could see waves breaking below as she looked down. As they broke, the lights on the square fringed them with silver, but beyond, the wide expanse of water was smooth and inky black.

For a long time she stood there, not analysing, not thinking much about anything except that she had two days left of this strange episode in her life. Thursday and Friday, and then, on Saturday, Mark was setting out very early to drive to London to take the finished manuscript to the publishers. She herself would drive home—and that would be the end.

She wouldn't let herself be sad, though. She wouldn't waste a moment of those two days in bemoaning the fact that Mark was really going out of her life for good this time. She would enjoy every minute of the time she had left with him. There was a smile planted firmly on her soft lips as she walked slowly back to the hotel, but her eyes were brimming with tears.

Next morning Mark was at the hotel soon after Anne had finished breakfast. He seemed to be in the best of humours. If he'd been up working half the night he showed no sign of it. He was freshly shaved and wearing a clean white shirt. His hair was damp from his shower and carefully brushed. Anne thought that he looked fabulous, and her heart seemed to squeeze up as he helped her into the car.

'You seem very pleased with yourself today,' she said lightly as they drove up the hill to the cottage.

He grinned. 'Oh, I am. Life is good today. I had one of those sessions last night that you might call inspirational, which come very rarely. When everything falls into place. When all questions are answered and everything begins to tie up. When the reader looks back at all the missed clues and says, "Of course—I might have guessed that's how it was."'

'You've finished the book?' Anne felt a twinge of disappointment. That would mean that he wouldn't need her much longer.

'Oh, no, not quite. But I'm more than halfway through the final chapter, and it should be easy going after that.' As soon as they were out of the car he hurried her through to the office. 'Let's get the old assembly line going.'

This was a new side of Mark, Anne thought as she settled down to work. His book was going well and that was the thing that mattered most of all to him. She wondered briefly how Trudi felt about that. But Trudi had her own exciting career, so perhaps she didn't mind very much.

The assembly line worked as smoothly as silk, and when Mark called a halt at half-past twelve they were more than halfway through the revision of the work he had typed the previous night.

'Time for some refreshment,' he said. 'I suggest we go down to the cafe and see what they can produce for lunch.'

'They do a nice lobster salad,' Anne told him. 'Just right for a hot day, don't you think?'

At the cafe there were few customers for lunch, and the ones who were there all seemed to be eating salad or sandwiches. The taller of the two middle-aged sisters who ran the cafe seemed pleased to see Mark and Anne. 'We've made a lovely beefsteak and kidney pie, m'dears,' she suggested hopefully. 'Could you fancy, that? With raspberries and cream to follow?'

Mark glanced at Anne. She'd been thinking of a salad but she was sure the sisters would be disappointed if nobody ordered their pie. 'That sounds lovely,' she said, and was rewarded by the pleased smile of their hostess. Mark agreed and ordered a carafe of red wine.

He looked at Anne quizzically when the woman had gone. 'Did you really want a hot lunch?' he asked. 'Or would you have preferred something cold?'

She pulled a face. 'Oh, dear, did it show so much?'

'Only to me. I'm beginning to know you, my child. You couldn't bear to disappoint the good woman, who was so obviously hoping someone would order her pie.'

Anne pulled a face. 'It's such a small cafe; it must be difficult for them to provide a luncheon menu. I couldn't bear to think of them cooking a pie that nobody wanted. Go on, tell me I'm stupidly soft-hearted. It wouldn't be the first time I've been accused of that.' Her wide blue eyes met his with impish challenge.

He wasn't smiling. He said quietly, 'I wouldn't put it like that.' He was looking at her strangely and she stared back at him, unable to look away and aware that hot colour was stealing into her cheeks.

She drew in an uneven breath when their lunch arrived. 'See how right I was,' she said. 'It looks delicious.'

Mark handed her a glass of wine. 'Er—yes. Yes, it does,' he said vaguely. 'Delicious.'

Anne stared at him. 'What's wrong? I'm sure they'd bring you something else if you don't like it.'

He seemed to come back from far away. 'Oh—no, sorry. I'm sure it's excellent. I was just thinking.'

She grinned at him teasingly. 'An idea for your next book?'

'I've got to get this one finished first.' He smiled back—his enigmatic smile.

Anne thought she'd never tasted a better pie, with its rich dark gravy, mushrooms and kidney, accompanied by baby potatoes and fresh green peas. The raspberries that followed were huge and velvety and she helped herself to lashings of cream. She put all thoughts of diet recklessly away from her. This was all part of her lovely few days and she Was going to make the most of every moment.

After lunch they walked along the beach at the edge of the tide, not talking much. A new kind of companionship seemed to have developed between them, but Anne told herself carefully that she was probably imagining it. It was more likely that Mark was busy developing the idea that had struck him in the cafe. Yesterday he had linked his arm with hers, but today he didn't touch her. Almost he seemed not to notice that she was there, until at last he sighed, 'Oh,

well, I suppose we'd better get back to work,' and they made their way to the car.

The work went as well as ever, but when the final page had been revised Anne sensed an impatience about Mark, and knew that he was anxious to get back to the computer and finish typing to the end of the book.

'Why don't you take me back to the hotel straight away?' she suggested. 'I really don't want supper after that huge lunch, and I have some letters to write.'

'Of course,' Mark got to his feet immediately. His voice was suddenly cool. 'I'm a selfish devil. You mustn't let me impose on your private life.'

Anne suppressed a laugh. He was thinking of love letters, of course, but all she had to do was to make out a cheque for the gas bill, which was in her handbag. They drove in silence to the hotel. Mark leaned over and opened the car door for her, and said goodnight briefly. 'Last session tomorrow,' he told her.

He imagined she'd be glad, Anne thought with a twisted little smile as she watched the Jaguar's tail-lights disappearing up the hill. What would he say if he knew that the words had sounded to her like the tolling of a funeral bell?

Friday started badly. Mark called at the hotel even earlier than he had done the previous day. But today he wasn't filled with euphoria. He seemed tense and irritable.

'I thought the finish would be easy,' he told her as they drove up to the cottage, 'but it's proved to be a brute. I've got to the end but it's going to need a lot of revision and patching up. I can't get any further by

myself.' He threw her a quick glance. 'You see how much I need you, Annie.'

She stored the words away in her mind to remember. No matter if they'd been said in the wrong context, they still sounded deeply satisfying.

It was a day of concentrated effort for both of them. The pile of discarded sheets of paper mounted higher in the wastebasket as the coffee in the kitchen jar sank lower. It seemed that Mark was never satisfied. He deleted words and paragraphs, substituted others, and then, when Anne had made the changes on the screen and printed out the page, decided he liked the first way better.

She kept her eye on the wall clock. One o'clock—two o'clock... Mark was sitting with his head in his hands, staring at the last page she had passed to him for revision. She said, 'I'll make some more coffee—and shouldn't you have something to eat? Did you have any breakfast?'

He looked up impatiently. 'I'm OK,' he growled. 'For God's sake don't start nannying me, Annie.'

She ignored that. She went to the kitchen, made coffee and cut a plate of cheese and tomato sandwiches. She wasn't very hungry herself; she'd had an excellent breakfast at the hotel. She went back to the office and put the mug of coffee and the plate down beside Mark. He glared at it, and then up at her, and gradually his face broke into a reluctant smile.

'I expect you're right,' he said. 'You usually are. It's very deflating to the male ego.' Suddenly he pulled the sheet of text towards him, crossed out a paragraph and scribbled an alternative in the margin. Then he handed the sheet over to her.

'Let's try that,' he said, starting on the sandwiches.

Anne read what he had written and smiled approvingly across the desk at him. 'I'm so glad,' she said. 'YOu're going to give Rafe and Barbara a happy ending.'

He shrugged. 'They bullied me into it. They refused to be parted at the end. Characters do that sometimes. It'll mean some more alterations, I'm afraid.'

'It's worth it,' Anne said stoutly, 'if it means that two nice young people are happy ever after.'

Mark pulled a face. 'I really don't know how my readers^ will take it. They expect the cynical touch at the end from me.'

'They'll love it,' she said. She felt warm and happy. It was wonderful that Mark was able to discuss his work with her. That was another small prize to store away in her memory.

All through the hot afternoon the clock on the wall ticked away the minutes. It seemed to Anne as if they would never get to the end of the book. But at last they did. It was all here on the desk in a neat pile—revised, printed, margins adjusted, pages numbered, everything in order. Mark packed it into a Jiffy bag between two pieces of cardboard and sealed down the flap. He addressed the label and then patted the parcel lovingly.

'It's a great moment when you've finished a book. We must celebrate.'

He carried the parcel into the sitting room and put it on the low table. Anne followed him.

He disappeared into the kitchen and came back holding a plastic bucket in which a bottle of Dom Perignon reposed among ice cubes. He put it on the table and fetched two glasses from the drinks cupboard.

'Prepared in advance.' He grinned. 'Especially to share with you as a small way of saying thank you.'

'Champagne—what an honour!' she said gaily. 'I'm not sure I deserve it.' She felt like bursting into tears, but she must at all costs hide her feelings from Mark, who was, of course, merely showing his gratitude for her help.

There was a faint plop as Mark opened the bottle expertly. He filled two glasses and handed her one. 'Let's drink to record sales and lots of lovely lolly,' he said, smiling.

Anne sat down on the sofa, laying her hand on the parcel, and repeated the toast solemnly. Mark sat down beside her and covered her hand with his free hand, holding up his glass in the other one. She felt the touch as if it were a high-voltage current passing up her arm. 'And the most important toast of all,' Mark went on, his hand still closed warmly over hers. 'To you, Annie.' He drained his glass.

She hadn't expected anything like this, and wasn't sure how she would manage to keep up the light exchange. After all, she told herself desperately, it wasn't so very different from the way a grateful boss might thank a secretary who had helped him to land a spectacular deal.

'I'd hoped we'd finish early enough to suggest that we went out to dinner somewhere,' he said, looking ruefully at his watch, 'but I'm afraid we'd not get a meal at this hour—even supposing we could find a decent restaurant. This isn't London, you know. Shall we raid the fridge again?'

Anne agreed eagerly.

'We'll make a special occasion of it,' Mark said, pulling out the drawers in a secretaire. 'I know I've got a tablecloth here somewhere. You go and put some food together and I'll fix the table.'

Anne discovered smoked salmon in the fridge and cut brown bread and butter with slices of lemon and crisp lettuce leaves. There was no fruit left, but she put cheese and biscuits and farm butter on the tray, and when she carried it into the sitting room she found that Mark had placed a small table in a window alcove with two chairs side by side. He had covered the table with a red and white checked cloth. The window was open and a truss of honeysuckle had strayed in from the front garden, its fragrance scenting the warm evening air.

Anne arranged the food and cutlery and Mark brought up the champagne in its ice bucket. They sat down and Anne clapped her hands with pleasure. 'It looks quite festive,' she said, and indeed it looked almost intimate, but she wouldn't use that word. 'We can pretend we're in Paris, sitting at one of those tables on the Champs-Elysees.'

'I wish we were,' he said. 'Shall we steal off for a weekend now the book is finished?'

She fluttered her lashes at him. 'I don't have anything to wear.'

He gave her a wicked grin. 'You won't need much.'

Anne clicked her tongue. 'Mr Rayne! I really can't think what you mean.' This was foolery, of course, but the very thought of being in Paris with Mark was heady stuff—as heady as the champagne with which he kept refilling her glass.

When they had finished the meal Mark stood up. 'Want more coffee?' he enquired.

Anne shook her head. 'I've drunk too much coffee today already. Bad for the nervous system.' She sighed, getting to her feet. 'I enjoyed that,' she said, and then, trying hard to sound matter-of-fact added, 'Well, I suppose this concludes our short partnership. It's been

something quite new, working with a real author. I shall look out for your book when it's published. When will that be?

'Not for at least a year,' he told her. 'The last one is only just on the bookstalls. I've got several spare copies- would you care to have one?'

'Oh, yes, please—and will you autograph it for me?'

He went into the office and came back carrying a new hardback book in its dustcover. Getting out his pen, he turned the pages and wrote on the title page: 'To my friend, Annie. With love, Francis Gardiner.'

Anne thanked him. It was all turning out rather formal at the end. There seemed to be a great lump in her chest.

She said in a tiny voice, 'I'd better go. Packing and so on.'

Mark didn't speak. He was standing quite still. Then he said huskily, 'I don't think I want to let you go.'

She looked up at his face in surprise, and then looked away again from what she saw in his eyes. There was a tumult of emotion stirring in her and she must ignore it. And yet...

'Annie.' He held out a hand to her, his voice deep and vibrant. He was leaving the next moment to her.

Her knees didn't seem to belong to her. She took a step forward and put her hand in his. He drew her slowly towards him and then his arms closed round her. She looked up into his eyes. In the shady light they were narrowed under thick black lashes.

She waited, trembling, until his mouth came down to hers. Just this once, she thought. And her arms went up round his neck and she gave him back kiss for kiss. She could feel his heart beating strongly, feel the quick rise and fall of his chest with his breath, and she knew

instinctively that he was exerting the utmost control. Her own control had gone with the last glass of champagne. She pressed herself against him, her fingers digging into his hair where it grew thickly at his neck. 'Mark,' she whispered. 'Oh, Mark.'

Then, somehow, they were on the sofa together, and he was kissing her mouth, her cheeks, sliding his lips down to bury themselves in the hollow of her neck. It was really happening—something she had never dared to expect. A warm glow of happiness swept through her.

Then, very slowly, she realised that something was wrong. He had moved away from her and was releasing her hands from his neck. Then she was conscious of a noise somewhere outside the room. The telephone was ringing in the office.

She sat back weakly on the sofa as Mark hurried out of the room. He was back in a moment or two.

'It's for you,' he said, and his face was expressionless. 'Hurry up, he's waiting for you.'

He? She dragged herself to her feet and stumbled towards the door, her hand reaching out to steady herself on the furniture, like a blind person. She felt dreadful.

'Wh-who is it?' she muttered, turning back to Mark, who was engaged in clattering the plates together noisily.

'You should know,' he said, and she hated the way he'd said it. 'I suppose you gave him this number.'

'But-'

'Go on, don't keep him waiting.' There was a nasty, contemptuous edge to his voice, and he turned his back on her and carried the plates to the kitchen.

CHAPTER SIX

ANNE stumbled into the office and sank into the chair beside the desk. She picked up the receiver. 'Yes, who is it?' she whispered. Her hand was moist and the receiver kept slipping round.

'Is that Anne Grey?' a man's voice asked.

She swallowed hard. 'Yes.'

'This is Roger French,' the voice announced.

She pressed a hand to her forehead. Who was Roger French? she thought stupidly. She must get a grip on herself. Then she remembered. Of course—Roger French, the director of the team she'd worked with.

'Have I got you at a bad moment?' Roger was saying. 'Shall I try again later? Mr Rayne seemed annoyed.'

She could imagine how Mark had sounded. 'Didn't you tell him who you were?'

'He didn't wait to hear. Anyway, I've found you now, Anne. I've tried all over the place—your home number and the hotel we stayed at. Then I thought it was just possible you might still be at the cottage.'

'Yes,' she said, and her voice sounded almost normal now. 'I've been working for Mr Rayne. I've finished today and I'll be off home tomorrow.'

'Well, let me explain,' Roger said. 'It won't take long. Bob and I have been talking things over and we've decided that we could very well do with another camera operator. We thought of you at once. You fitted in so well with the team and we'd love to have you with us. Would you consider it?'

Anne rested both elbows on the desk and hung onto the receiver. 'It's such a surprise. I don't...'

'No hurry,' Roger assured her. 'We're going up to Scotland tomorrow to do some prospecting. Will you give it some thought and ring us in London when we get back? If you're interested we could meet up and discuss terms and so on.'

'I will, certainly,' Anne said. 'And thank you for thinking of me. It all sounds very exciting. I did enjoy my time with the team.' She asked about Bob, and Roger told her that he was making good progress. They said goodbye and she replaced the receiver and sat staring blankly at it.

Already she had put Roger's words out of her mind. All she could think of was how she was going to face Mark. He must have thought that she had given this number to her 'fiance', and that it was he who had rung her up. It would be a kind of relief, now, to explain everything to him—including the ring that was still on her finger. But what was the point? They would be parting almost immediately, and anyway he wouldn't be interested in her private affairs.

The door opened and he came into the office, sitting down in his own chair opposite hers, just as they had sat for so many hours, working amicably together.

'Finished your call?' he enquired. He spoke naturally, just as if nothing of any importance had happened. And it probably hadn't—to him. Just a kiss as he might give to any reasonably attractive girl if the time and place were right.

She nodded and replied in the same tone, 'Yes, thanks.'

'Good,' he said, and then neither of them seemed to know what to say next. The silence went on and on. Mark was the first to speak. He said, with a wry smile,

'Look, Annie, may we draw a line under the last quarter of an hour? I know I promised to behave like a little gentleman, but talking about Paris put ideas into my head. You're very lovely, as I'm sure you're aware, and at that moment I found you quite irresistible.'

He sat back in his chair, still with that half-smile on his lips. He might have been talking about two other people.

Then he said, 'If you were my girl I wouldn't go off abroad and leave you on your own, and I very nearly told your boyfriend so just now.'

So he *had* thought it was Keith. Perhaps he'd been expecting a call from Trudi and that was why he'd been so peevish when he'd found it wasn't his beloved. That was like Mark, Anne thought, wanting to find fault with him. She said lightly, 'I've forgotten it already. Too much champagne, I'm afraid.'

'The demon drink!' he chuckled. It wasn't very funny, but they both laughed.

Anne stood up. 'I really must go now and get packed up. And by the way, may I drive my car up here tomorrow morning and tidy up the computer and the disks? My video equipment is still in the hall and I can collect that too. I'll come up after you've left, so as to make sure I won't get in your way—I'll probably have a final swim first.'

Mark nodded. 'I'll leave the key under the mat. Just pop it through the letterbox when you leave.' He frowned. 'And, talking of swims, I haven't forgotten that I've spoilt most of your short holiday. A writer's selfishness. The book comes first.' He pulled out a wallet. Anne's eyes widened in horror. Was he going to be so insensitive as to offer her money?

He extracted a card from the wallet. 'That's my London address if you should want to get in touch for any reason. And please give me your own address and phone number.' Another card was extracted and he

wrote the information on the back and tucked it away in the wallet. Then he got to his feet. 'And now, I'm afraid, nothing remains but to deliver you safely back to your hotel. Shall we go?'

Sitting beside Mark in his car, Anne stared straight ahead, watching the powerful headlights whiten the high banks on either side of the lane. This was the last time she'd drive down this hill with Mark. Fate or chance, or whatever, had brought him into her life twice already. She couldn't expect it to happen a third time. She wouldn't see him again.

She'd never be able to tease him out of a bad mood, never see the rare smile that would flash out suddenly, lighting up his serious face, never hear his deep voice. She didn't know how she was going to bear it. In the light of the dashboard she watched his long, sensitive fingers gripping the driving wheel lightly and remembered how they had felt when they'd rested on her cheeks. Tears washed into her eyes and she bit her lip hard to force them back.

They were at the hotel much too soon. Mark drew the car in beside Anne's Metro. He left the engine running and got out swiftly to open the car door for her. She was careful to avoid touching him as she stepped out.

They stood beside the residents' entrance. Mark put out his hand and she put hers into it briefly. 'I hate protracted goodbyes,' he said. 'And I'm sure we'll meet again some time or other. So I'll say *au revoir*, Annie, and I hope you'll be very happy and successful.'

He didn't wait for her to reply. He leapt into the car and slammed the door. Then he backed round with a swish and she heard the engine gather speed up the hill. She didn't watch it disappear. All she needed to do was to crawl into bed hide her head under the bedclothes and weep like a child.

Anne passed a wretched night. She had known that parting from Mark was going to hurt. She had tried to arm herself against the moment when it arrived, but in the end he had spoiled all that when he'd taken her in his arms. To him it had been merely an impulse, to be dismissed and forgotten. But to Anne it had been a glimpse of heaven and she couldn't forget.

She lay awake, tossing and turning, thumping the damp pillow. Some time in the early morning she realised that she was shivering. Switching on the bedside light, she got out of bed and walked about the room. She swilled her hands and face with cool water then she took one of the folded blankets from the bed that Philippa had occupied, wrapped herself in it, put out the light and got back into bed. Soon after that she stopped shivering and fell into an uneasy sleep. She was thankful when morning came.

After a quick wash she dressed in jeans and a thin T- shirt. That would be comfortable to drive in. She did her best to repair the ravages of the night. Staring with disgust at her reflection in the mirror over the dressing table, she remembered that Mark had told her she was very lovely. Well, she didn't look lovely now; she looked terrible. Her hair was limp, her eyelids were swollen and her cheeks were blotchy. Ah, well, there would be nobody but the good Mrs Yeo to see her, and she would be much too busy to notice.

After the team had left she had told Mrs Yeo that she preferred toast and coffee to the hearty breakfasts the men had consumed, and this morning, after she had managed to eat one slice of toast, helped down by coffee, she went back upstairs, packed her bag, straightened the bed and rolled up the bathing towel and swimsuit. She tossed it all into the car. She would not swim this morning. It would remind her too much of the touch of Mark's fingers as he had rubbed the oil into her back on that first morning.

She went to look for Mrs Yeo to tell her she was leaving and to pay her bill.

'Oh, it's all settled, m'dear. The gentleman telephoned me for the amount and I had a cheque this morning.'

Anne frowned, puzzled. 'Mr French?'

'Oh, no, m'dear. The writer gentleman from the cottage up the hill.'

A nice gesture from Mark! But she wished he hadn't made it. In her present mood it seemed to her that he'd been anxious to see the last of her.

Anne thanked Mrs Yeo, saying how comfortable she had been, and took her leave.

In the car she consulted her watch. It was much too early to drive up to the cottage; Mark might not have left yet, although he had planned to leave by six o'clock. She longed to get away from everything that reminded her of him but she couldn't risk meeting him again and saying another polite goodbye.

She drove down to the car park in the square, climbed down the steps to the beach and marched backwards and forwards from one side of the cove to the other, consulting her watch impatiently. Finally she climbed over the flat rocks, found a dry spot and sat down, watching the cotton-wool clouds drift across the deep blue of the sky, listening to the splash of the waves as they met the margin of the rocks below her and the thin cry of the gulls. The sun beat down on her head and the heat made her feel drowsy; her head dropped forward.

Pictures of Mark surged back. His face appeared behind her closed eyelids, as she had seen it in her camera lens at the wedding. She remembered the sharp stab of awareness that had made her heart leap

in her breast. Yes, she had fallen in love with him in that moment; she knew that now. Everything else that had happened to her had been like the unfolding of a plot in one of his books. Inevitable. And just as inevitable was the end.

The mystery about him, about his personal life, was like the mystery in his books too. If the clues had been there she had missed them. She knew nothing about him except that he was a writer with a flat in London and a cottage in Cornwall, and that didn't tell her anything. She knew there was Trudi, of course, but he never spoke of her. The only clue to Trudi's existence was the row of exotic pots and bottles in the bathroom.

She raised her head with a jerk, opening her eyes. This wouldn't do. She had a long drive before her this afternoon. A drink in the cafe would put in another half hour or so, she decided, and made her way back up the beach. After lingering as long as her agitation could bear over a coffee, she decided that she must chance it. She drove slowly up the steep hill to the cottage. The car coughed once or twice on the way up, but she didn't suppose it mattered. It was old and didn't like the one- in-three hill, that was all. Mark's car had gone, and she drew a breath of relief. The key was under the mat as he'd promised. Anne let herself in and went straight to the office.

Coming back here was even worse than she'd expected. Everything reminded her of Mark. She even turned the word processor on and read the final part of the last chapter of his book. She tidied the desk and put away in the drawers everything that might be wanted— even scraps of paper on which he'd scribbled notes.

The top drawer was crammed full of paper when she'd finished and wouldn't close. She stuck her hand in to push down the contents at the back, and found that it was catching on a snapshot. Glancing at it with interest, because it might be of Mark, she saw a photograph of a tall, beautiful girl with long black hair, wearing a minuscule

flesh-coloured bikini which made her look as if she was not wearing anything at all. She had one arm round the shoulders of a boy of about six or seven.

Trudi had a son, then. He was too like her to doubt the relationship—very dark, with liquid brown eyes and ridiculously long lashes. He was wearing swimming trunks and they were both tanned to a biscuit-brown. On the back of the snapshot was written, in Mark's careless handwriting, 'Trudi and Matthew—cottage, June'. It must have been taken just before he'd come up for the wedding.

She dropped the snapshot back into the drawer and closed it with a quick thrust of her arm, angry that a picture of Trudi should be her last memory of Mark.

She stood up, needing to get away as quickly as possible. The desk was tidy, the files in order. Mark wouldn't need her any more. She walked blindly down the hall. Her video equipment was stacked behind the front door. She'd turn the car and come back for it, she decided.

She wasn't surprised when the engine didn't start as she turned the key. The car was old, and once or twice lately it had been reluctant to start. Anne got out and put her hand on the bonnet, it was very hot, so no choke would be needed. She got in the driving seat again and turned the key. There was a chatter from the self-starter, and then silence.

Anne clicked her tongue and tried again, with the same result. Then she tried with her foot hard down on the accelerator, as she'd been told to do when the engine was very hot. Still no result. In desperation she pulled out the choke and turned the key again. The engine remained obstinately silent-and now she'd flooded something. She wasn't sure what it was, but she remembered that she would have to wait before she tried again.

Oh, why hadn't she taken that course in car maintenance, as she'd always meant to do but never got around to? Half an hour later it became plain that she must get help if she were going to get home today.

Anne muttered all the swear words she knew. This was the very last thing she would have chosen to happen. She'd just have to stay where she was and hope that Mark wouldn't return until she was safely on her way.

Feeling utterly dispirited, she went back to the office to look up the numbers for any garages in the district. She hadn't much hope of getting anything done at a weekend, but she could try.

Then she heard the sound of a car driving up the hill. She stood still, holding her breath. It would be too cruel if Mark had returned for some reason.

The car was turning into the parking space. The engine was switched off. Anne couldn't move as she waited for the door to open. She hadn't locked it when she'd come in and* now it swung open and a boy came rushing in eagerly. He stopped in front of Anne, regarding her suspiciously. 'Who are you?' he demanded.

Before she could say a word a woman's voice came from the front door. 'Don't be rude, Matthew,' it said automatically. She advanced towards Anne, who was still trying to take in this new arrival. The boy was undoubtedly the boy in the photograph, but the woman- no, *whoever she was, she wasn't Trudi. She looked about forty and wore an expensively tailored suit of light tweed and her dark hair was cut fashionably short.*

'I'm looking for Mr Mark Rayne; is he here?' she demanded brusquely.

Anne didn't reply. Matthew had gone straight into the office and now he rushed out again, demanding, 'Where's Dad? He's not here.'

The woman gave a gusty sigh. 'You go upstairs, Matt, and find that book you were telling me about.' The boy pounded up the uncarpeted stairs in trainers that looked too large for his thin legs and the woman sighed and walked into the sitting room. She sank into a chair wearily. 'I'm Frances North, Mr Rayne's sister,' she announced. 'Do you know where he is?'

Anne stared at her. She was trying to come to terms with the fact that Matthew was Mark's son, not Trudi's.

'Well, do you know or don't you?' the woman said sharply.

Anne had no intention of being patronised by this woman, even if she was Mark's sister. She sat down in one of the other chairs. 'Mark left for London very early this morning.'

Frances North nodded, staring at Anne as if it were her fault. 'Then that's why I couldn't get a reply. I've nearly worn out my phone trying to contact him.' She looked Anne up and down and added, 'And what, exactly, are you doing here?' Her expression left Anne in no doubt that she had made up her own mind.

Anne raised her eyebrows. 'I'm sure Mark will explain that when you see him,' she replied coolly.

Frances North drew in an exasperated breath. 'Look, Miss...'

'Grey,' Anne said. 'Anne Grey.'

The other woman nodded. 'Well, Miss Grey, sorry if I sound hasty. I'm in a bad fix. Matthew has been staying with me in Brighton while my brother finishes his novel and this morning I heard that my husband's mother has had a heart attack. She lives alone and my

husband is abroad. I've got to get to Bath as soon as I can. When I couldn't contact Mark the only thing was to bring the boy back here and hope his father had returned. I suppose I could take him on to Bath, but a hospital is no place for a child to sit in for hours.' She ran a hand distractedly through her thick dark hair, in a gesture that reminded Anne of Mark.

'He should have reached London by now,' she said. 'Would you like a drink while I try and phone?'

Frances North didn't even show surprise that Anne was acting as hostess. She accepted the long, cool drink offered to her and sank back in her chair, sipping it and murmuring thanks. She was obviously at the end of her tether.

Anne picked up her bag and went into the office. She found the card that Mark had given her. There was no reply from the number of his London flat. She thought for a moment or two and then opened the book of phone numbers on his desk. A little detective work on one of his books gave her the name of the publisher, and after a short talk with somebody at their office she thanked her and went back to Mrs North.

'There's no reply from Mark's flat,' she said. 'I rang his publisher and a woman there told me that he had an interview with the director and left the office about one o'clock. She thought he intended to go on to a book fair in Bristol.'

Frances North was looking at her in a different way now. 'You've been very bright. I wouldn't have thought of that.' She frowned worriedly. 'How on earth am I going to get in touch with the wretched man? I've rung every number I can think of—even the number of his mobile phone. I gave him a mobile phone as a present, but he's probably run down the battery and forgotten to recharge it. Oh, he's hopeless.' She lapsed into a disgruntled silence.

When she didn't seem to be going to speak again Anne ventured, 'What are you going to do now?'

Frances North looked at her helplessly. 'I can't think any more,' she said. 'I suppose I'll just have to take Matthew with me to Bath. What else can I do?'

Anne thought wryly, Here we go again! Fate hasn't let me off the hook yet. There was only one possible answer.

She said, 'If Matthew would agree to staying here with me until his father gets home, I'd be quite happy to keep an eye on him. I intended to drive home to Warwickshire this afternoon, but my car's broken down and I don't know when I'll be able to have it repaired. I'm afraid I can't give you any references but I've been helping Mark with his new computer; that's why I'm here.'

Frances North's dark eyes opened wide. 'I can't imagine Mark, of all people, being a computer wizard.'

'He isn't.' Anne grinned and added drily, 'That's why *I'm* here.'

'Ah! Yes, I see now. All becomes clear.' Mrs North smiled back. 'I'll get Matt down and see if he agrees. He's not very easy just now. He's had a bad dose of flu and has been away from school most of this term. But I'm sure he'll want to stay now we're here, rather than go on sitting in the car. He got very bored and grumpy.' She walked to the bottom of the stairs. 'Matt,' she called. 'Come down here will you?'

Matthew came downstairs much more slowly than he had gone up. He went to his aunt, not looking at Anne. She put an arm round his waist as he stood close to her chair. 'Matt, dear, I have to go to Bath, to see Dorothy, who is ill. I don't suppose you want to come with me and sit in the hospital, do you?'

He shook his head without speaking.

'How would you like just to stay here until Dad comes home?'

Anne saw a look of fear pass over the boy's face. 'By myself?' He looked up at his aunt, his dark eyes wide.

'No, of course not, Matt. Anne will be here—she's a friend of Dad's. She'll look after you.'

He turned his head and gave Anne a long, considering look. She didn't speak—just waited for him to make up his own mind.

He stuck out his chin. 'Are you going to marry my father?' he demanded.

Anne laughed. 'What gave you that idea, Matthew? No, I came to help him with his computer, that's all.'

'Dad's got a computer? Truly?' His eyes brightened.

'Yes, truly,' she told him firmly.

'And can I use it?'

'I don't see why not,' Anne said. 'You'd probably be better at it than your dad is.'

He gave a little chuckle. 'Oh, goody. He won't like that.'

Anne's eyes met Frances North's over the boy's head and the latter gave a relieved little nod. 'You'll stay and learn about the computer, then, Matt? That's a wonderful idea.'

But Matthew wasn't quite sure yet. He moved away from his aunt and came and stood before Anne, the big dark eyes searching her face doubtfully. 'You'll stay all the time?'

'Until your dad comes home. Yes, I will.'

'And you won't go away an' leave me at night? It's scary here in the dark.'

What had happened to put that frightened look on the boy's face? 'I won't go away. Promise. Cross my heart.'

Mrs North was preparing to leave, gathering up her bag and patting her hair. 'Goodbye, then, Matt.' She kissed him, to his obvious disgust. 'Be a good boy. Now, run along and find that computer.'

He needed no second telling. He raced away towards the office.

Anne went to the door with Mark's sister, who looked vastly relieved. 'Well, that's a load off my mind. Thanks a lot, Anne. I'm sure he won't be any trouble if he's got a computer to amuse himself with. I'll be off now. You'll try to get in touch with Mark, won't you? Matthew is due to return to school next week, to finish off the term, so Mark is sure to come back here soon. I've left a message on my answering machine so he'll know where we are when he phones me, and I'll be in touch with you to see what's going on. No, I won't have anything to eat, thanks. I'll pick up a snack on the motorway. If you come out to the car I'll give you Matthew's bag, with his clothes and belongings.'

Anne followed her out to a racy little car and Frances pulled a couple of cases out of the boot. 'Afraid there's some washing wants doing,' she said.

Anne took the bags. 'That's OK; I'll cope,' she said. 'I hope you find your mother-in-law better.'

'Thanks.' Frances unlocked the car and then, to Anne's amazement, leaned forward and kissed her cheek. 'You're a very nice girl, Anne,' she said. 'If Mark weren't so stupid about that Trudi wench... Oh, well...'

She got into the car and the engine roared. With a wave of her hand she drove away down the lane.

Anne walked slowly back up the front path. She had to rearrange her thoughts. She'd been sure that the boy in the snapshot was Trudi's son, but she saw now that the likeness might just as well be to Mark. He had the same dark hair, the same long, curved lashes over velvety near-black eyes. Matthew was the first clue to the mystery of Mark's personal life. But why the mystery?

You'd have thought that any man would have been so proud of a son like Matthew that he'd want to show him off to the world, not hide him away with his aunt. She shrugged and dismissed speculation from her mind. There were more practical matters to be tackled—like unpacking Matthew's clothes and finding something to eat for lunch. And, most important, making friends with Matthew.

The latter was far easier than she'd expected. She hadn't any experience with children so she simply treated him as a grown-up, which proved to be the best thing she could have done. She found out immediately that he was an intelligent boy, and the computer formed a bond between them.

He said he had just started on a computer class at school when he'd 'got a virus', as he told her rather proudly, so he had lost several weeks and was keen to catch up with David, his best friend. He fired questions at Anne and she remembered the beginning of her own training days and was able to answer them. She fed in the word-processing program and suggested that he should write a letter to his Dad while she made the lunch.

'What would you like for lunch?' she asked him, and he lifted his head from the screen long enough to say briefly, 'Egg and chips, please.'

'I think we could manage that,' she said, and was rewarded by a wide grin before she went out to the kitchen.

She opened the fridge, feeling relieved. She didn't think Matthew was going to be a problem.

The afternoon passed happily enough. Anne vetoed constant staring at the computer screen as being bad for Matthew and they spent most of the time in the garden- Matthew's room was well stocked with games and books as well as a small cricket bat and a variety of rubber balls. After tea there was another session with the computer until it was almost time for Matthew to go to bed.

He drank a cup of Ovaltine and ate several biscuits before he agreed to let Anne close down the computer and take him upstairs. He told her that he didn't need help and she left him to it, not even telling him to wash behind his ears—except as a joke, which they shared hilariously. It was only when Matthew came downstairs in his pyjamas to ask her to read to him that she noticed again the look of fear that she had seen on his face before.

He took her up to his bedroom and snuggled down into bed, having first selected a book from his bookshelf. Anne had expected him to choose a story about aliens from outer space or some other exciting adventure. She was surprised when instead he selected a rather delightful book about a small dragon who kept getting into trouble because he breathed fire and had to keep a bucket of water tied to his tail to put out any accidental damage by lashing his tail around. Matthew giggled over the scrapes the little beast got into and Anne joined in.

At last Matthew began to get sleepy. Anne leaned down and gave the thin little form a warm hug. He hugged her back and clung for a moment, saying, 'You won't go away? You'll be just next door?'

'That's your dad's room, isn't it? I'll be quite comfy downstairs on the sofa.'

'No,' he pleaded, clinging harder. 'I want you next door so you'll hear me if I... I...' He trailed off lamely.

'OK,' Anne agreed. 'I promise I'll be in the next room.' If Mark wasn't here to look after his son, he'd just have to put up with her doing the best she could, even if it meant occupying his bedroom. She certainly wasn't going to sleep in the bed. Just the thought of that made her nervous system go into a spin. It would probably smell of Trudi's perfume, and that wouldn't be conducive to sleep.

Matthew seemed satisfied. The dark lashes drooped over his heavy eyes, and even before Anne went out of the room he was asleep.

She stood looking down at him, her eyes soft. He looked very like Mark, with his long lashes curving onto his cheeks. How wonderful to be Mark's wife, and mother to this endearing boy. What had happened? Had she died or had it been a divorce? Well, she would probably learn something about Mark's personal life at last.

She went out and unloaded the Metro, piling everything up in the hall. Her travel-bag she carried upstairs and left outside the door of the bathroom. It was stupid, she told herself, but she knew she was putting off the moment when she had to go into Mark's bedroom.

Downstairs again, Anne took care not to go out of earshot of Matthew's room for the rest of the evening. She had meant to go through his clothes and do any washing that needed doing, but that could wait until the morning. The supper dishes could also wait until morning.

She went into the office to phone Mark's flat for the third time since Frances had left. There was no reply. There was something vaguely frightening in the thought of the telephone ringing in an empty room,

and she began to have visions of a car smash, which made her stomach turn over. She pushed the thought away quickly, made a pot of tea and carried it up to Mark's bedroom, with the book he had given her.

The room was large and plainly furnished with a stripped pine wardrobe and chest. A man's room, she thought, seeing no evidence of Trudi's presence here. The bed was large and covered with a folksy material in a pattern of green and white to match the curtains. Anne closed the curtains but looked away from the bed quickly.

There was a wide cane chair, plumply cushioned, and she pulled up the bedside table, set her teatray down on it and made herself comfortable. She could sleep in this chair, she decided. In fact, she'd have to. Not for anything would she get into Mark's bed. She poured out a cup of tea and opened the book.

It had been a tiring day and Anne hadn't slept much last night. She hadn't realised how tired she was. Half an hour later her head sank back and the book fell to her lap. She wakened some time later to find that she was shivering and aching all over. The chair hadn't been as comfortable as she'd supposed.

She had a short fight with herself before she admitted that sitting all night in this chair was not a good idea.

Gingerly she made herself pull back the coverlet on the bed. She got a pleasant surprise. She'd expected to find a tumble of sheets and blankets underneath, but instead she saw that the bed had been stripped and made up again with clean sheets and pillowcases, smelling not of Trudi's perfume but very faintly of lavender, as if they had been stored away in a linen drawer. Anne made up her mind. This was too inviting to be refused.

She went along to the bathroom and had a quick, warm shower and took a clean nightdress out of her bag. Then she brushed her hair, cleaned her teeth and peeped into Matthew's room. He was still fast asleep.

She left the passage light on and opened both doors wide. Then, with a contented sigh, she slid in between the smooth, fragrant sheets. She allowed herself to dwell briefly on the thrilling thought that, after all her tears last night, tonight she could tell herself that she would see Mark again very soon. Within three minutes Anne was fast asleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHE was having a nightmare. A dark form filled the open doorway, vague and menacing. She opened her mouth to scream but no sound came. She lay rigid, her eyes distended, fixed on the open door. Then a light clicked on and slowly the form turned into Mark Rayne. He took two strides towards the bed and glared down at her. 'What the hell are you doing here?' he demanded roughly.

Anne hadn't recovered from the paralysing moment of terror that always accompanied a nightmare. She couldn't speak. She couldn't sit up.

He leaned over her, grasped her shoulders and shook her none too gently. 'Come on, what's the game, Annie?' he shouted. 'Don't tell me you weren't expecting me.'

She remembered everything now in a sudden flash. Matthew, asleep in the next room. She sat up, wriggling away from his hands. 'Shh!' she hissed. 'Keep your voice down. And don't dare to touch me again.'

He must have heard the furious indignation in her voice, for he drew away and stood, waiting. 'Well?' he said more quietly. 'What's this all about?'

'Your son is fast asleep in the next room. If you haven't already wakened him with all the noise you were making.'

For a moment he stood stock-still, transfixed. 'Matthew—here!' He hurried softly out of the room and she heard him move cautiously along the passage. She supposed he was going to reassure himself that Matthew was really here.

Mark Rayne was an unmannerly boor and she hated him, Anne told herself as she got out of bed and put on her cotton dressing gown, pulling the belt tightly round her. However surprised he might have

been to find her in his bed he need not have attacked her so roughly. There was no doubt about what he thought this time- he thought she was trying to seduce him. What a nasty mind the man had, and she'd tell him so in no uncertain terms.

She groped for slippers and fumbled to get her feet into them. Then she crept out into the passage and saw Mark coming towards her. He joined her and whispered, 'He's still fast asleep. Come downstairs and we'll sort this out.' He walked quietly along the passage and down the stairs.

Before she followed him she looked into Matthew's room herself. In the light from the passage she saw that he was still blissfully asleep, one arm thrown back over his head. He was a darling—much too nice to deserve a father like the brute downstairs.

She waited at the head of the stairs until she had stopped shaking and then, setting her lips together, she marched down and into the sitting room.

Mark was slumped in a corner of the sofa, a glass of whisky in his hand. He looked up when she came in and said wearily, 'OK, don't tell me. I've made an idiot of myself once again. Do you want me to grovel?'

Anne opened her mouth to say the crushing things she'd been rehearsing on the way downstairs. Then she looked at his face and saw there the lines of deep unhappiness she'd seen in her lens on the day of the wedding, the expression that had changed her mind about him, that had caught at her heart.

She sat down, pulling her dressing gown round her knees. 'It's cold down here,' she said calmly. 'If you fix me a small brandy I'll explain what happened.'

He got up immediately and brought her a glass with a measure of brandy in it. 'Thank you,' she said, and sipped it cautiously. She wasn't used to brandy but she needed something to steady her nerves. The trembly *feeling had not yet gone from her stomach.*

'That's better.' She saw that he was hovering over her, watching her anxiously, and tried a small smile. 'You woke me from a horrid nightmare,' she said. 'In fact, you *were* the nightmare.'

He took one of her hands when she put down the glass. 'You're icy cold still,' he said. 'Wait a bit, there's an electric fire here somewhere.' He poked about behind chairs and tables and found a small one-bar fire. Very soon there was a red glow from the fireplace.

'Oh, lovely,' Anne breathed, and dropped to her knees before it, holding out her hands to the heat.

Mark was beside her on the hearthrug, one arm pulling her close to the warmth of his body. 'Poor little Annie,' he said gently. 'Now tell me what a brute I am.'

It was so lovely, here in the warm with his arm holding her. 'By this time I should be used to you jumping to wrong conclusions. You do make a habit of it, don't you?'

He rubbed his cheek against her tumbled hair. 'I seem to, where you're concerned,' he said. 'I think it's because I made up my mind about you on that first night after the wedding, when you were kind to me. And when something happens that seems to disturb that image I react badly. Does any of this make sense to you?'

'I think so,' she told him slowly. 'But first impressions are sometimes wrong.'

'I don't think mine were,' he said, almost to himself. 'Are you feeling warmer now? I suggest a drink of tea might help. You stay here and

I'll make some.' He didn't wait for an answer but got to his feet and hurried out to the kitchen. ^

Anne didn't move until he returned with a tray of tea. He put it down on the low table beside the sofa and came over to draw her to her feet. 'Now, come and sit beside me and tell me all about what happened,' he said.

She allowed herself to be settled on the sofa. It was lovely to be fussed over. It was usually she who did the fussing.

'Leave the door open,' she said. 'Matthew might call out.'

Obediently he went across and opened the door. Then he came back and sat close beside her on the sofa. He put a cup of hot tea in her hand, poured one for himself and then cosily placed his free arm round her. 'Warming up a bit?' he enquired solicitously.

She nodded. 'I'm fine now, thanks.' A slow warmth was creeping up her body, but it had nothing to do with the fire, or the tea, or even the brandy. It was a different warmth—the sensuous warmth that came from the feel of his arm around her slim waist, the smell of his thick woollen pullover, the sound of his deep, caressing voice. She longed to move closer, to put her head on his shoulder, but she reminded herself that he was merely being kind and thoughtful because he felt a trifle guilty.

'OK, then, talk,' he ordered with a grin.

Anne pulled her thoughts together and told him exactly what had happened since she'd driven up to the cottage this morning, including the fact that her car had broken down.

'So you see, as I couldn't get home anyway,' she concluded, 'I offered to stay with Matthew while your sister drove to Bath to look after her mother-in-law. And that's about all. I think Matthew's been quite

happy with me, but he seemed nervous about being left alone at night and insisted on my staying near him in your room. But I'll be quite comfortable here on the sofa if you can find me a couple of blankets.'

'Don't talk rubbish,' Mark told her flatly, taking her empty cup and putting it on the table. 'It's two o'clock in the morning and you're going straight back into bed— my bed.'

She wasn't sure about the sound of that, and began to argue. For answer he lifted her in his arms and planted her at the foot of the stairs, coming up behind her to push her upwards and into the bedroom, where he lifted her again and lowered her onto the bed. 'You should have been a sheepdog,' panted Anne, quite out of breath.

'Wait until morning to think up any more names for me,' he told her, drawing the sheet and blankets up to her chin. 'No more out of you tonight, though.'

Anne peeped up at him over the coverlet. 'But where are you going to sleep?'

'Somewhere close to Matthew, in case he wakes,' he said, opening a drawer and taking out more blankets, which he draped on the basket chair. 'I've slept in a chair before now. Go to sleep, my child, and forget about me.'

Anne didn't suppose she'd ever sleep again, and she certainly would never forget him, but she found herself slipping into a warm haze of happiness; she didn't quite know why. And before Mark came back from the bathroom she was fast asleep again.

* * *

Anne wakened to see sunshine pouring into the room through the small window and Mark standing beside the bed with a mug of tea in his hand. Matthew was standing beside him.

'Good morning, Annie,' Mark said.

Matthew echoed him gravely. 'Morning, Annie.' The boy's face broke into a wide grin as Anne sat up. 'Can I go and switch on the computer, please?'

'You must ask your father now,' she told him, smiling back. He really was a super little boy, she thought. Mark must surely be proud of him. She wondered again what had happened to his mother. Surely she would find out something of Mark's personal life now.

Matthew spun round. 'Can I, Dad?'

Mark grimaced. 'Don't tell me you're a computer freak.'

Matthew thought this was very funny and he giggled. 'Freak. That's what I am.'

'Run along, then,' Mark said. 'You can teach me what you know later on.'

And Matthew was away in a flash, thudding down the stairs in his trainers, carolling, 'Freak—freak—freak,' as he went.

Anne turned to take the mug from Mark, and as she did so she noticed that the other side of the bed, which had been perfectly smooth last night, was rumpled, and that the pillow bore the indentation of what must be Mark's head.

'Oh,' she gasped. 'I didn't—I wasn't...'

He smiled down at her, putting the mug into her hand. 'You didn't wake up?'

She shook her head, biting her lip, making herself meet his eyes.

'You were so beautifully asleep,' he said. 'I hadn't the heart to wake you to ask your permission. I put up with that blasted chair as long as I could. After the first hour it seemed like a fairly efficient instrument of torture, so it was a choice between lying on the floor or sharing the bed. I chose the most inviting. Martyrdom doesn't appeal to me. Are you very angry with me?'

If he'd touched her in the night, if he'd even laid a finger on her, her body would have responded, Anne knew. She could feel the tension in the atmosphere and tried to think of some light remark to break through it. 'It's your bed,' she said, and drank her tea, not looking at him. 'I was the one who wasn't invited.'

She could feel his dark eyes on her, imagine the amusement lurking round his mouth. But when she looked up he was not looking amused at all. She was suddenly aware that she was wearing a very revealing satin nightdress, and as she saw his scrutiny move from her face down to linger on her breast she caught her breath, the colour flooding her cheeks. What a stupid flippant remark she had made, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Before he could make any reply, she said brightly, 'I mustn't waste this lovely morning. Have you had breakfast, you and Matthew? I should have been down to get it for you. I've slipped up on the job, but I'll be very quick and then you can tell me whether there's anywhere I could get my car put right today.' She was jabbering nervously and hoped it didn't show.

Mark said, 'I suppose you're in a hurry to get home?' The dark eyes were searching her face and again she was overcome by shyness and looked away.

'Oh, well, I've been away nearly a week, and the post will have piled up and be waiting for me.'

'Only the post?'

She knew what he was asking. The other night he had mistaken that phone call, and now he was wondering if her 'fiance' would be waiting for her to come home. This was getting absurd, she must put him right soon, but not this minute.

'Yes, only the post,' she said innocently.

He smiled in a satisfied way. 'I enquired because I'm pretty sure you won't find a garage open on Sunday and because I've got a plan for the next two days,' he said.

'For me?' Her brilliant blue eyes sparkled. 'That sounds interesting.'

'I hope you'll think so. I thought it would be a good idea to make up a little for the holiday I selfishly robbed you of. The weather looks settled and we could have fun, the three of us. I have to get back to London on Tuesday, but that leaves us two whole days. Matthew is all for the idea, I may say. You seem to have made quite a hit there. Well, what do you think?'

Anne didn't need to think. 'It sounds lovely. Yes, I'd like that.'

'Good.' He smiled in satisfaction. 'Matthew will be chuffed. I'll go and tell him. When you've had breakfast we'll make a start.'

As Anne hurried along to the shower, she hoped that it wasn't only Matthew who would be chuffed.

Half an hour later they all climbed into Mark's car and drove down to the beach. Mark had taken a look at the Metro and confessed himself no mechanic. He couldn't spot anything wrong, but he knew the manager of a local garage and would ring him up tomorrow morning.

The day passed in a golden haze for Anne. It was as though she and Mark and Matthew were a family—one of the many little groups dotted about the beach.

They made up games with the big rubber ball that Matthew had brought with him and Matthew and Anne ran races—she didn't have to pretend to let him win. After that she devised guessing games while Mark went to look for ice-cream and returned with three enormous cornets. Then they climbed over the flat rocks and found tiny crabs in the pools left by the tide and they swam, shrieking at the coldness of the water. Matthew swam well but Mark was careful not to allow him to stay in long.

Matthew submitted obediently.' 'Cos of my virus,' he explained to Anne.

She was touched by Mark's care for his son. She and Mark took it in turns to stay with Matthew while they themselves swam in short, hard bursts of energy, to keep warm. When it was time for Matthew to come out Anne went with him and left Mark to swim out towards the horizon. Anne, rubbing Matthew's thin little back dry, had to remind herself that she was really only a stand-in for Trudi, who one day would be his real stepmother. When he was dry she sent him off to run about and warm up thoroughly while she dried herself.

By now she was shivering slightly; the sea really was cold, even in July, she was thinking as she rubbed her arms and hands hard to bring back the circulation. Suddenly something dropped onto the rug, and she looked down to see the ring from her engagement finger. The intense cold must have shrunk the final swelling round the bone. She picked it up and held it in her hand, looking down at it with an odd feeling of shock.

If Mark noticed its absence she would have to explain why she had allowed him to believe that she was still engaged. Did she want to do

that? No, not now, she thought. It would alter the nature of their friendship and spoil these last lovely days with him.

As Matthew came dashing up and threw himself onto the rug beside her, she slipped the ring into her handbag and tried to forget all about it.

Anne applied oil to her legs and arms and stretched out on the rug. 'I only allow myself ten minutes in the sun,' she told Matthew. 'I'm so fair that I look like a boiled lobster if I burn. You don't need to bother about it, do you? You're beautifully brown already.'

'That's 'cos of when I was here before,' he told her. 'Dad said the open air and sunshine would be good for my virus. I didn't go to the beach much, though. Dad was working, you see, and that—that woman wouldn't bring me.'

He pulled a face, plainly indicating his opinion of 'that woman', who was presumably Trudi. Anne felt a quick rush of satisfaction—quickly suppressed as she realised the unhappiness an unsympathetic stepmother could bring to a sensitive boy like Matthew. She watched him wander off again and knew that she was going to miss him horribly when she left to go home. She loved his grave Little smile and the way his dark eyes lit up with excitement and enthusiasm.

Mark emerged from the water and ran across the wet sand, breathing hard. 'That was good. I'm horribly out of condition, though.'

Anne sat up. She felt at a disadvantage, lying there with Mark towering over her.

He grabbed a towel and rubbed his hair, making it stand up in little peaks. Then he stretched out on the rug beside her, his hands behind his head.

Anne allowed her gaze to rest on him. Stripped down to his short swimming trunks, he looked superb, she thought—all muscular power, with the dark hair plastered wetly to his chest and his arms and legs. She had an impulse to reach down and lay her hand on his thigh. Heavens! What was she thinking of? She saw him watching her from under the fabulous curved lashes which Matthew had inherited, and said, a little awkwardly, 'I must say you don't look out of condition.'

He grinned up at her. He'd heard the tremor in her voice, the wretch. She said quickly, 'Isn't it time to be thinking of lunch? Matthew and I are starving.' She pulled on the white cotton robe, which served as a beach wrap as well as a dressing-gown. They talked over where they would have lunch and decided to go up to the cafe and see whether beefsteak and kidney pie featured on the menu. 'If we have a good lunch we won't have to cook this evening,' Anne suggested.

Mark smiled whimsically. 'Good little housewife, aren't you, Annie?'

She flushed. 'What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing. It's very right,' he said lazily, reaching up to pat her hand. 'It's one of your many desirable qualities, my sweet.'

He was stroking her hand absently now—and it was her left hand. Anne caught her breath. Would he notice the absence of the ring?

He sat up abruptly. 'What's happened to your ring? You didn't lose it in the sea, did you?'

She felt the hot colour rising in her cheeks as if he'd accused her of some misdeed. 'N-no,' she stammered, and then rushed on, 'I've got it here.' She gestured towards her bag. 'I wouldn't risk swimming in it.'

He nodded. 'That's OK, then,' he said, but she thought he was looking rather oddly at her.

She was saved from further embarrassment when Matthew came rushing up with a stone he'd found. 'Is it a fossil, Dad?' he asked excitedly. 'Miss Weldon was teaching us about fossils last term.'

Mark examined the stone, but his glance kept moving towards Anne's face questioningly.

'Maybe, Matt. You keep it and show it to her when you go back to school on Wednesday. And get your shirt on now; we're going to have lunch at the cafe.'

There was indeed beefsteak and kidney pie on the menu, and the subject of the ring was not referred to again.

After lunch they drove slowly back to the cottage and tossed up for who should have the shower first. Anne won and enjoyed washing the salt away. Except for the episode of the ring it had been a perfect morning. And there was another whole day after today. She just had to be careful not to let herself think of the three of them as a family. That was even more dangerous than the dream that Mark could love her.

She got into her dressing gown, knotted a towel round her hair and went out to the top of the stairs. 'Next on the list,-' she called down cheerfully.

Mark came bounding up the stairs. 'Did you hear the phone? That was Frances, ringing from the hospital in Bath. It seems that her mother-in-law is holding her own but the*next few days will be critical. I offered to go over to her but she said there was nothing I could do and that I'd only be in the way. Brotherly regard!

'I think she's rather cross with me for letting her down. She said if you hadn't come to the rescue she doesn't know what she would have done.' He looked crestfallen. Then he brightened as he said, 'Frances

thinks you're wonderful, Annie. It seems that my family are all in your debt. Myself most of all, of course.'

The liquid black eyes were fixed on her face as he added very softly, 'And at your feet.'

He took her ringless hand and raised it to his lips, then turned it over and planted a kiss in the palm. 'I think you should put that ring back on again,' he said, and went along to the bathroom.

Later in the afternoon, when they had all spent a lazy hour in the garden, Mark drove along the coast road, finding hamlets and cover and they had a Cornish tea of scones, jam and clotted cream at a little cafe where the veranda looked out over the sea.

'Matt's enjoying himself,' Mark said fondly, his eyes resting on the boy, who was rolling about on the grass, playing with a ginger kitten. 'He's much better, thank goodness,' he said. 'It's been a bad time.'

'Was it flu?' Anne enquired, and Mark told her that it had indeed been flu, but with various complications afterwards.

'But he really seems to have recovered now. I haven't seen him look so happy and relaxed for a long time.' He was silent, his eyes looking out across the expanse of sea below as if he were remembering something.

'Annie, Annie.' Matthew came running up, holding the kitten in his arms. He plonked the squirming bundle on Anne's lap and she held the little thing firmly with one hand and stroked him under his chin with the other, talking softly to him. After a few brief struggles the kitten settled down and was soon purring contentedly.

'Why wouldn't it do that for me?' Matthew wanted to know.

'You have to be very gentle and show him that you love him and wouldn't do him any harm.'

'I see.' Matthew held out his arms and Anne very carefully put the kitten back in them. By now the kitten had got sleepy, and after a few moments fell fast asleep, to Matthew's delight. 'He knows I love him,' he whispered with a wide grin.

Mark stood up abruptly. 'End of lesson,' he said, picking up the bill. 'Are we all ready to move on?' He spoke quite amiably but Matthew recognised that this was a command and put the kitten down gently on the warm grass. It gave a plaintive little mew and curled up again.

By the time they got back to the cottage Matthew's eyelids were drooping.

'Bed for you, old fellow,' his father told him, and he made no protest. 'Do you want a drink?'

'Annie knows what I like,' Matthew said sleepily. 'An' she'll read the little dragon.'

Mark glanced at Anne. 'This seems to be your department,' he said with a faint grin, and hoisted Matthew onto his shoulders to carry him upstairs. Matthew gurgled with delight and Anne went to the kitchen to make Ovaltine and fetch Matthew's favourite biscuits. She was putting them on a tray when Mark came in.

'I've said goodnight to him,' he said, 'but it's you he wants.'

Oh, dear, he wasn't jealous, was he? She said lightly, 'He's crazy about a book I've been reading to him—the adventures of a small dragon. He's devoted to animals.' She smiled up at Mark, willing him to smile back. 'Kittens and dragons—what next?'

He didn't smile back, and there was a bitter note in his voice as he said, 'I've been watching him today— he's a different boy. It's new to him to have the care you give him.'

She stood for a moment's taut silence. Then she said slowly, 'Perhaps I'd better remove myself as soon as possible, then. Before he gets used to me.'

He caught one of her hands in his. 'Not before you have to, please,' he pleaded. 'It makes such a difference, having you here.'

Anne waited for a moment, but when he didn't say any more she picked up the tray and went upstairs to Matthew.

She was smiling when she came downstairs half an hour later. Mark was not in the kitchen but there was a wonderful smell of coffee. She found him in the sitting room, where he'd put the coffee-tray on the low table and switched on the electric fire. He was standing at the window, hands stuck in the pockets of his jacket, looking out at the dark bank of thick shrubs in the front garden.

'Matthew's almost asleep.' She chuckled as she added, 'I love that little dragon story. It takes me back to childhood, when my father used to read me a story every night.'

She looked over at Mark as he sat down beside her on the sofa but there was no answering smile. She saw the same unhappy expression in his dark eyes that she had seen in her camera lens at the wedding, the same hard set to his mouth.

He said, 'I think you told me that your mother died when you were very young.'

She nodded. 'I never knew her. I had nannies, but it was Daddy who really cared for me. I suppose it seems strange because he was well past middle age when I was born, but he was wonderful and we did

everything together. He used to call me his little pal.' She turned her head away as the tears stung behind her eyes. 'I miss him t-terribly.' The tears brimmed over and she opened her handbag and fumbled for a handkerchief.

She mopped her eyes and blew her nose hard. 'S-sorry.' She sniffed. 'It's just that I haven't quite got used to being alone yet.'

Mark leaned down and picked something off the carpet. 'You're not quite alone, though, are you?' he said quietly, and held out her engagement ring to her.

'Oh—it must have fallen out of my bag.' She took the ring from him, feeling utterly confused, and made a futile attempt to push it back onto her finger. 'It came off in the cold water,' she mumbled.

'Let me.' Mark took the ring from her and lifted her hand.

'No!' She stared at him, wide-eyed, then grabbed the ring and dropped it back in her handbag. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered, feeling all kinds of a fool. 'It's just that— that— Oh, well, because that's where it belongs.' She indicated the handbag.

Mark was regarding her with quizzical interest, not in the least perturbed by her emotional outburst. 'Are you saying that the fiancé is a myth?'

She had control of herself now. 'Certainly not. Until six months ago he was very real.'

'Then why go on wearing the ring?'

'It wouldn't come off when we—we parted. I'd trapped my fingers in a car door and the swelling never quite went down. Daddy was very ill and I had no time to bother about it just then. I meant to have it filed off some time.'

'But you let me make a fool of myself over that phone call that came through for you. I naturally thought it was your fiance.'

'It was Roger French,' she said. 'He offered me a job.'

There was a long silence. Then Mark said, 'Well, you might have told me there wasn't any fiance. I thought we were friends.'

Anne sipped her coffee and put down the cup, laying her head back. Nothing less than the truth was demanded of her now, and she had to collect her thoughts to find out what the truth was.

'Yes, I could have told you,' she said slowly at last. 'I'm not quite sure why I didn't. At first, that night after the wedding, I saw no reason to enter into explanations—we were hardly likely to meet again. And then, when we did meet again—by coincidence—you were so ready to think the worst of me that it seemed that if I suddenly disclosed the fact I wasn't engaged you would probably look on it as an invitation.' The big blue eyes met his frankly. 'I think that's the clearest way I can explain.'

He looked away. 'I see,' he said heavily. 'You couldn't trust me.'

'No more than you trusted me,' she pointed out with a wry smile. 'I never guessed that you had a son until he...'

'Was wished upon you.' Mark sighed deeply. 'My goodness, Annie, I have taken advantage of your kind heart.'

She shook her head. 'It doesn't look like that to me. I've enjoyed my time here, and Matthew's a grand boy. It's a joy to be with him.'

'Yes,' he said, and she was moved by the pride and tenderness he infused into that one little word.

She waited, hoping that he would say something more—perhaps tell her about Matthew's mother. But when he didn't she got to her feet and said, 'I'm going to make some sandwiches for supper and soon after I'm off to bed. Are you sure you won't let me sleep down here? The sofa's very cosy.'

He roused himself. 'Quite sure. I've put up a camp bed in Matthew's room.'

'Yes,' she said, 'I noticed it.'

'Well, that solves all problems.'

After that they both avoided anything personal, and during supper they talked of the afternoon's car trip and the villages and coves they had discovered until Anne declared that all the fresh air had made her sleepy and said goodnight.

Mark followed her upstairs. 'May I come in? I just need a few blankets,' he said, hesitating at the door.

'Of course.' Anne waved a hand. 'Help yourself.'

He came into the room, gathered the blankets from the cane chair and took another from a drawer in the chest next to the wardrobe. He draped them across one arm and walked to the door, then turned to give her a long, enigmatic look. 'Goodnight, Annie,' he said. 'Please note that I'm carefully resisting suggesting what I'd like to suggest. I've already wrecked your opinion of me.'

He went out and closed the door gently.

She heard him take the blankets to Matthew's room and a minute or two later go down to the sitting room.

Anne sat on the bed, staring at the closed door. She should have been feeling relieved that she had explained to Mark the reason for her mild deception about the ring. But relief wasn't the emotion uppermost in her mind.

As she stared at the closed door all she felt was disappointment.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANNE was downstairs first next morning, and was making toast when Mark joined her, closely followed by his son, who, Anne guessed, had already been having fun with the computer in the office.

She smiled brightly at them both and wished them good morning. She had decided, in the wakeful hours of the night, that this last day should be a good one for Matthew. And, whatever mood Mark chose to be in, she wouldn't let him provoke her.

Mark, however, was not in the least provoking. He was thoughtful and rather silent, and left the chatter to Matthew and Anne. The boy had thought of a lot of questions he wanted to ask her about the computer, and as soon as he had finished his breakfast he asked permission to leave the table. When Mark grunted, 'Off you go,' he was away to the office.

Mark got up. 'I'm going to phone about your car now. I'll come back and tell you what I've arranged.'

Anne thanked him, her smile firmly in place. He wasn't smiling this morning; he seemed to be making an effort to concentrate on what he was doing and once or twice she caught a far-away look in his dark eyes. Mark was still a mystery, she thought with a sigh—a mystery which she was no nearer solving. He'd had an opportunity, last night, to tell her a little about himself, but he had ignored it, so there was nothing she could do but keep on smiling.

He came back to the kitchen as she was piling the dishes into the sink. 'I've had a word with Tim Bruce,' he said. 'He's going to send one of the lads up to collect your car and he'll give it a thorough going-over in the repair shop. Tim's an excellent mechanic—I'd take his word about cars—and I told him I must feel easy about your Metro before you set out on a long drive tomorrow.'

'I've arranged to call in later on this afternoon to pick the car up—he's making a special effort to have it all finished and ready for the road by then. His place is just outside Mevagissey, so we'll get tidied up here and leave in about half an hour. We can spend the day at Mevagissey and call for your car on the way home. That suit you?'

'Yes, of course, and thank you,' Anne said politely, matching her businesslike tone to his. 'I'll go and get packed up. And what about Matthew's things? Your sister said there was some washing to be done for him.'

Mark frowned slightly, as if trying to marshal his thoughts. 'Washing? Oh, yes, I can take it all back to London. My housekeeper will look after it. I'll go up and collect it; there are various sheets and things to go.'

He departed upstairs while Anne tackled the washing- up. They were having a domestic morning, she thought. It might have been fun if Mark hadn't been so glum.

The dishes were soon washed and set to drain and Anne went to the office to find out what Matthew was doing.

'I've finished my letter to Dad,' he announced triumphantly. 'Can I print it out?'

Anne showed him how to feed paper into the printer and switch it on. 'Now you tell the computer you want to print it.' She demonstrated the keys to press and watched the boy's delighted face as the sheet of paper emerged from the printer.

'I'll give it to Dad,' he said, folding it carefully.

'And you can tell him that you've learned as much as he has,' Anne suggested mischievously.

As Matthew went running off to find his father she read the letter on the screen.

Dear Dad

I hope you are well. I am better from my VIRUS. I am going back to school on Wednesday. I have had a nice holiday and I like Annie very much. Love from Matthew.

She was smiling softly as Mark came downstairs carrying a large black bag, followed by his son with another bag. Mark was holding the letter. 'I hear my son is leaving me behind in the computer stakes?'

He looked towards Anne, but before she could reply Matthew broke in. 'Annie showed me how to do it,' he said. 'She's better than Mr Dodd at school.'

Mark's dark eyes softened. 'Well said, Matt.' He ruffled the boy's hair. 'You're more generous than your father.'

'What's genus?' Matthew demanded.

'A quality that I seem to lack, my boy.' He slid a look toward Anne. 'Now, let's go out and dump these bags in the car and watch for the breakdown truck, shall we?'

Left alone, Anne printed a second copy of Matthew's letter and put it away in her handbag. It would be part of this short episode of playing at being a stepmother, she thought with a sudden lump in her throat. Hastily she closed the computer down and went out to join the other two at the front, just in time to see the truck coming noisily up the hill.

She opened the car to make sure she hadn't left anything important inside, and then took out her keys and put them on the dashboard. It took only minutes for the cheerful boy in overalls to hitch the Metro up to the truck. Then, with a word to Mark, he was off again.

Anne watched her little car being towed away with its nose stuck up in the air in an undignified fashion, and blinked away a tear. It had been such a gallant little car and had brought her down here without a murmur. But she had bought it second-hand and it was getting very old now, so she must expect to have some trouble with it. And anyway, she told herself, she shouldn't be sentimental about cars.

The remainder of the day passed like a dream, the sunny hours following each other much too quickly. Mevagissey was a charming small fishing town. They walked round the harbour walls, watching the fishermen loading up their lobster pots, then they found an aquarium, where the dim coolness inside, with its rows of illuminated glass tanks, was a welcome respite from the heat.

Matthew was intrigued. 'Look, he's coming to make friends,' he said gleefully as the largest fish glided up to the glass and seemed to be peering through at him.

Anne loved the patient way that Mark read out all the information about the different kinds of seawater fish printed on labels underneath the tanks. He never seemed tired or bored by the endless questions Matthew threw at him. Watching them, loving them both, Anne thought what a wonderful father Mark was.

When Matthew was finally persuaded to leave the fishes there was a walk along the narrow streets, looking into shop windows. Mark bought a box of coloured pencils for Matthew and a notepad with views of Mevagissey on each page for Anne. They bought rolls and sandwiches and cans of lemonade and picnicked on a wooden seat on the harbour wall. Later Mark managed to hire a dinghy with an outboard motor, and they chugged out of the smooth harbour and into the open sea.

Matthew was enchanted by the sight of the black heads of the cormorants bobbing on top of the waves before they dived below, to

emerge again some distance away. The idea of birds that actually dived was new and fascinating. Anne had never seen cormorants before and she was just as fascinated.

Mark opened up the engine and took them racing across the waves, then he took off his jacket and rolled it up to make a cushion for her head and she lay back, watching him as he sat at his ease, one strong arm laid across the tiller.

Matthew climbed about, happily studying the rocky coast as they drew in towards it, and questioning Mark about smugglers and the dark caves where the tide washed in and out. He was having the time of his life, and so was Anne. There was no past, no future, just this glorious sun-drenched present.

When Mark shut off the engine and dropped the anchor the small boat rocked gently. Anne tried to store it all away in her memory as she gazed through her sunglasses-at everything—the blue of the sea where it met the sky in a faint haze, the black, mysterious rocks, the coloured sails of distant yachts, the smell of the sea, the gentle lapping of the waves against the boat, the chill of the wafer as she trailed her hand in it. Most of all the way Mark gave her a lazy smile now and again, without speaking. She thought that he, too, was enjoying himself, and had put away whatever had been worrying him earlier on.

At last they returned to the harbour and climbed out of the boat, drugged by sun and air. They had tea at a cafe in one of the grey stone buildings overlooking the harbour and then it was time to start for home, picking up Anne's car on the way, as Mark had arranged with his friend the mechanic.

The garage was large and prosperous-looking, with glossy new cars on show behind a wide plate-glass window. Mark parked outside and

said, 'You and Mark stay here and I'll go and find Tim and see what the damage is.' He disappeared round the side of the showroom.

Matthew got out and studied the new cars in the window while Anne waited anxiously. If the Metro couldn't be repaired today how was she going to get home tomorrow?

Mark seemed to be a long time, but at last he came back and slid into the back seat beside her. Anne looked at him expectantly.

'I'm afraid it's bad news,' he said. 'How long have you had the car, Annie, and where did you buy it?'

She told him she'd bought the car from a second-hand dealer about two years ago. 'But it's always gone very well,' she added.

His lips were compressed. 'I'm afraid there was a time bomb built in,' he said. 'Did they tell you that the car had been involved in a bad crash? No? Well, they should have done. It's been patched up very skilfully but Tim spotted it.' Mark's face was dark with anger. 'I'd like to get my hands on the man who sold you that car. God knows what might have happened—without warning.'

Anne felt cold. She turned to Mark, white-faced. 'What am I going to do?'

'There's one thing you're *not* going to do,' he told her grimly. 'I wouldn't dream of allowing you to drive that car again.'

'And who are you to lay down the law?' Her feeble attempt at self-defence sounded pathetic, even to her.

Mark put an arm round her shoulders. 'I'm sorry, sweetheart, it's a blow for you but we must do the best we can. It would be more than Tim's job is worth to try to put your car on the road again. It needs a new engine for a start. The best he can do is offer a hundred pounds

for scrap. He can probably use one or two things that have escaped damage. What do you think? Shall I fix it with him?'

Anne was very close to tears. 'I s-suppose so,' she sniffed.

'Would you like to talk to Tim yourself?' Mark asked, but she shook her head.

'No, you arrange it for me, please.'

He squeezed her shoulder. 'I'm glad you trust me that far,' he said with an odd little smile, and got out of the car.

She watched him stride across to the garage. She wasn't thinking about the loss of her car, or even trying to work out whether she would be able to afford to buy another. All she could think about was that little smile Mark had given her. There had been something almost tender in it. And he had called her sweetheart!

He was back beside her very soon, slipping a cheque into her hand. She folded it without looking at it and put it away in her handbag.

'Tim was sorry he hasn't a suitable replacement to offer just now,' Mark said. 'He has a Metro coming in next week which he can highly recommend—one careful lady owner and all that—but I had to tell him we were leaving tomorrow. We'll have to work out what's the best way to get you home.'

'That's my problem.' Anne had to cling onto her remaining self-respect.

'It's *our* problem,' Mark told her quietly. 'But don't let's think unpleasant thoughts today. We're still on holiday. I'll prise Matthew away from those cars and we'll make for home.'

The end-of-holiday feeling seemed to affect all of them for the rest of the evening, and Anne found it difficult to keep her smile in place. Somehow she managed it, insisting on cooking mushroom omelettes for them all, although Mark said he hadn't much appetite. Even Matthew wasn't his usual bright self, and Anne wondered if his return to school was the reason.

It was past his usual bedtime when he was finally taken upstairs by Mark, who stayed with his son longer than usual before Anne was summoned to read to him.

'I'm afraid he's a bit mokey,' Mark told her. 'But perhaps you'll cheer him up.'

That night she finished the little dragon book, and as she put it away she saw that Matthew was struggling with tears. She sat down on the side of the bed. 'What's wrong, Matt?' she enquired gently. 'Is it the thought of school?'

He shook his head. 'No,' he sniffed. 'I like school. It's just—just—oh, everything's been so nice and—and sort of happy. An' I want it to stay the same. But you're going away, aren't you, Annie?' He brightened. 'P'raps now your car is broken you can stay with us?' he suggested hopefully.

'I've got my own home to go back to, you know,' she said, and then she had an inspiration. 'Perhaps your dad will bring you up to see me sometimes. That would be lovely.'

He agreed that it would and cheered up a little as she gave him a goodnight hug, but it was some time before he dropped off to sleep. Anne moved away and busied herself setting out his clean clothes for the next day's journey. Her chest was tight and she had difficulty in fighting back her own tears.

Downstairs again, she began to tidy up the kitchen. She heard Mark speaking on the phone in the office. She waited until he had finished and then switched on the kettle and put her head round the door. 'I feel like a final cup of tea—how does that appeal to you?'

They drank tea in the sitting room, side by side on the sofa—for the last time, Anne thought dismally. Everything was for the last time. She feed the smile back firmly. 'About tomorrow,' she began. 'Do you know about the trains from the nearest station? I'll probably have to make a few changes, but...'

He laid a hand over hers. 'Shut up, sweetheart; we are not talking about trains. You're driving back to London with us and staying overnight. We can think about your next move then.'

Anne felt her heart perform a somersault. He had called her sweetheart again.

'But' I can't...' she began feebly.

'Yes, you can. Now, I don't want to hear any more about it. I've just phoned my housekeeper and told her to expect us tomorrow afternoon and to prepare the spare room for you.

'You're being very masterful,' Anne complained unconvincingly.

'That's right,' he agreed with a grin.

There was a sudden silence and she tried desperately to think of something to say. She heard Mark draw in a ragged breath. 'I think,' he said at last, 'that you had better drink up your tea and then take yourself off to bed before the urge to be too masterful overcomes me.'

She put down her cup and he stood and pulled her to her feet. The touch of his hands sent shivers all over her body. She had only to move a little closer, to smile up into his dark, liquid eyes, and she

would be in his arms. The temptation was almost too strong for her. But she knew that he didn't really want that—that he would be sorry and guilty afterwards.

She moved away from him and his hands dropped limply to his sides. 'Goodnight, then, Mark. I'll be up early in the morning. And—and thank you for arranging everything for me.'

He said huskily, 'If only that were all I had to arrange. Goodnight, little girl.' He turned away and she went quickly out of the room and up the stairs.

She was glad—glad, she told herself fiercely—that she hadn't given way to that overwhelming need to fall into Mark's arms. She would *not* let him guess that she loved him and wanted him more than anything else in the world. Twice he had shown that he was ready to think the worst of her, even though he had found out his mistake afterwards. She wouldn't give him any chance of turning that contemptuous look on her again. They were friends, that was all, and that was how it would remain until the end.

The drive to London next day was a sober affair. Before they'd left the cottage Anne had asked Mark whether he intended to return very soon. 'Because there's a lot of food in the fridge that won't keep more than a few days,' she'd said, hoping that he wouldn't make any more cracks about her being a good little housewife.

He'd told her that he had phoned the woman in the village who came up now and again to clean the cottage and had told her to help herself to any food that remained. 'I don't know when I'll come back,' he said, adding darkly, 'Maybe never.'

Anne knew him well enough by now to abstain from asking any more questions, and the luggage had been stacked in the boot in an atmosphere of finality.

Once on the motorway the Jaguar ate up the miles with effortless ease. Anne had made sure that she sat in the back, while Matthew took the passenger seat next to his father. The conversation—what there was of it was confined to the two of them. Matthew had obviously been trained not to chatter to the driver and, beyond one or two questions, he was silent as he sat looking out of the window.

After they had stopped at a service station to have a snack lunch, Mark suggested that Matthew should sit in the back seat, next to Anne. The boy curled up happily, with Anne's arm round him, and she drew him out to talk about school and his friends and the games he played. In the driving mirror Anne's eyes met Mark's and he was smiling. It was the first time she had seen him smile that day.

Once on the outskirts of London the traffic got heavier and the going slower, but at last Mark pulled up the car in the forecourt of a block of modern flats, informing Anne, when she enquired, that they were in South Kensington. When he tossed the keys to a uniformed porter, with instructions to put the car away and have the luggage sent up, Anne realised that Mark had returned to a luxury environment very different from that of the cottage in Cornwall.

The flat, when the lift had taken them up to the third floor, gave more proof of lavishness and sophistication. They were met by the housekeeper, Mrs Taylor, a tall, middle-aged woman with a pleasant manner, who took Anne to her room. It was a picture of extravagant elegance, with its deep white carpet and its pink satin drapery. Mrs Taylor showed her the shower room and left her, hoping that she would be comfortable.

Anne was standing in the middle of the room, feeling rather lost amid all the grandeur, when Mark tapped at the door and came in.

He stood looking at her with a wry expression. 'Well, how do you like my silver cage?' he enquired enigmatically.

Anne hesitated. 'It's very grand,' she said. 'But somehow it doesn't seem like you.'

'It isn't,' he said. 'It was Trudi's choice. The cottage was mine.'

It was the first time he had spoken his fiancée's name to Anne, and she felt a stab of shock. It was like having known that something terrible was going to happen but being unprepared for it when it did. For a moment she thought she was going to faint. The blood seemed to drain out of her head and she put out a hand to the nearest object—which was a satin-covered chair—to steady herself until the room stopped revolving round her.

She felt Mark's hands holding her, guiding her into the chair. He said, 'You're tired out, Annie. It's been a long drive. Sit quietly there for a moment.' He brought her a glass of water, which she gulped thankfully, and by the time Matthew came running into the room she felt almost normal.

Matthew planted himself in front of his father. 'Will you get a computer for here, Dad? You'll miss it, won't you?'

Mark ruffled the boy's dark hair. 'You're much too crafty for your years, my lad. Now, run along and tell Mrs Taylor we'll have tea in the study.'

The boy ran off and Mark put a hand on Anne's shoulder. 'Better now?' he asked gently.

The touch of his fingers burned through her. 'I'm fine,' she said. 'I'll tidy up and join you. Tea is all I need.' If only that were true!

In the pink-tiled shower room she swilled her face and pulled a comb through her tumble of gold curls. She looked horribly pale and did what she could with the contents of the make-up case in her handbag.

She found Matthew hovering in the passage when she opened the bedroom door. 'I've come to show you the way,' he announced, and took her hand to lead her to the study.

It was twice the size of the study at the cottage, with a huge desk, several comfortable chairs and a wonderful view over the trees in the park. Mark stood up when they came in. 'I use this as my sitting room,' he said. 'The drawing room intimidates me.'

There was a tray of tea on a table facing the window, with plates of home-made scones and a sandwich cake with cream and jam oozing from the edges and a sprinkling of icing sugar on top, which Matthew eyed hungrily. He hadn't eaten much at the motorway cafe.

Mark automatically said, 'Scone first, cake afterwards.' His gaze was fixed on the contents of a letter which he had just picked up from the pile of correspondence on the desk.

Anne saw his face change as he read it. She had seen him look angry before, but that was nothing to compare with the fury she saw in the narrowed dark eyes now. His mouth was set in a tight line and his hands were clenched into fists as he threw the letter down on the desk.

Matthew had noticed nothing. He was happily munching scones and turning over the pages of a comic. Without saying a word, Anne poured tea from the silver pot and added three lumps of sugar. She put the cup and saucer into Mark's hand.

He scowled at it and she thought he might throw it across the room, but after a moment or two he drank a little of it. He made a sound of disgust. 'Ugh! What filthy muck.' He glared accusingly at Anne. 'You know I don't take sugar.'

Unperturbed, she said calmly, 'Drink it up; you look as if you need it.'

His eyes were locked on hers and his expression was unreadable, but he finished drinking the sweet tea to the dregs. He stood up, still looking at Anne. 'You don't miss much, do you?' he said with a twisted smile, folding the letter and putting it in his pocket. 'I'm going out for a while. I need some air.' He went quickly out of the room, and a moment later she heard the front door close.

Matthew looked up from his paper. 'Where's Dad gone?'

'He had to go out; he won't be long.' Anne hoped that was true. She'd been alarmed by the look on Mark's face. What could possibly have happened to make him as angry as that?

The time crawled by. Matthew showed her the funny bits in his comic and she did her best to laugh with him, but her thoughts were with Mark, turning over and over the possible reasons for his sudden fury. It must be a personal matter, she decided. He wouldn't be so upset by a business disappointment or any loss on the stock exchange. Something to do with Trudi, perhaps? That seemed most likely.

She gave it up when Mrs Taylor came in to clear the table and ask whether Mr Rayne had said what time he would like supper. She had a casserole in the oven, she told Anne, and if Miss Grey would come with her she would show her where things were. 'I'm off this evening. I'll be leaving about six,' she explained.

Anne followed her to a sumptuously equipped kitchen.

Mrs Taylor had laid a table for two in an alcove. 'Mr Rayne likes to eat out here when he's alone in the evening,' she told her. 'Will that suit you, Miss Grey?'

'Oh, yes, certainly,' Anne said. 'It'll be fun sitting here looking round at all the impressive state-of-the-art gadgets. How do you remember which buttons to press for what?'

They laughed together. Mrs Taylor's intelligent eyes had given Anne one or two thoughtful looks as they'd moved about the kitchen and Anne had expressed fascinated interest, but the housekeeper was far too well trained to ask any questions, except to say rather diffidently, 'Will you be staying long, Miss Grey?'

Anne thought Mrs Taylor looked quite disappointed when she said, 'Oh, no, I'm off home tomorrow.'

She went back to Matthew and stayed with him until his bedtime. He showed her his room, with all the books and games stacked on shelves, and she had to choke back the tears as she thought that in a very few years there would be football boots and cricket bats but she wouldn't be here to watch him grow up.

Two hours later, when Matthew was in bed and asleep, Mark came in. Anne jumped to her feet when she heard his key in the lock. She'd been sitting in the study, watching the sunset and worrying about him for what had seemed hours, and now her heart was beating fast as she wondered what to expect.

But as soon as he came into the room she saw that, although he looked deadly tired, the anger had gone out of him. The deep furrows on his brow had disappeared and there was a new eagerness about him. She said, 'You must be tired and hungry. Mrs Taylor has gone home but she left some supper for us. Would you like to eat now?'

He shook his head as he walked across the study to a drinks cupboard and poured out a stiff whisky. 'Later,' he said, tossing down the drink. 'I want to talk to you first.'

She sat down again, waiting for him to speak. He came and took the chair beside her. Without any preliminaries, he said heavily, 'It's Matthew. I may be going to lose him.'

Her hand flew to her mouth as she recoiled from the shocking thought that had come into her head. 'He's not—not ill?'

'No, thank God, it's nothing like that.' He turned towards her. 'You're one of us now, Annie. I'd like you to know the situation. It isn't a very pretty story but I'll try to make it as brief as possible.'

He was silent, as if gathering his thoughts, then he said, 'I've had custody of Matthew since my ex-wife walked out five years ago, when Matthew was just two years old. Lorna found she wasn't enjoying being the wife of a struggling author.' He flicked Anne a rueful look. 'I was struggling then, you know.'

'When the baby came along she found it even less enjoyable. We did our best to keep going for a while and then the inevitably happened. Lorna's very beautiful and she met someone else. I've heard that there have been several "someone elses" over the years, but now it seems that she's found a millionaire—which is what she wanted all along. He married her a short time ago.'

Anne kept absolutely silent, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, as he went on.

'Because he's twice her age, and is unable to have children of his own, he thinks he'd like to have a son to prop him up in his old age.' The bitterness in Mark's voice made Anne shiver. 'I got all this from my lawyer, who's a personal friend and keeps an eye on Lorna's doings,' he continued. 'He's had a suspicion that they might bring a suit asking

for custody now they are married. Also, because I'm not married myself, I'll have great difficulty in contesting it. The mother always has the advantage in these cases.' He ran his hand distractedly through his dark hair as he added, 'My God, what a mother Lorna made!'

Anne spoke at last. 'But I don't understand...' She searched his face. 'Aren't you going to be married yourself soon? Lady Brent was saying—'

'She doesn't know,' he cut in. 'None of my friends knows. My engagement came to an end the day before Andrew and Elizabeth's wedding. Nice timing, wasn't it?' He gave a bitter little laugh. 'So, you see, I've nothing to fight the case with—no family home to give Matthew to match the one Lorna and her new husband can provide.'

Anne's heart was racing. Mark was free; he wasn't going to be married. Her thoughts didn't take her any further than that, but she wanted to shout it from the rooftops. She tried to bring her attention back to what he was saying.

'... letter informing me that there will be a custody hearing at the beginning of August—about a fortnight from now.'

Anne tried to be helpful. 'I suppose Matthew will be consulted himself?'

Mark shook his head. 'Possibly—I don't know. I wish I could be sure of something, but it all seems such a ghastly muddle.'

Anne's blue eyes were bright with tears of sympathy. 'Oh, Mark, I'm terribly sorry.'

Dark eyes met the blue ones. 'You're very sweet, Annie,' he said. He got up and strode restlessly to the drinks cupboard. 'But I'm afraid,' he went on as he poured another whisky for himself and a sherry for her, 'that this is one problem that even your kind heart can't solve.'

Unless—' he spoke without turning '—as you're not going to marry your boyfriend, you would consider marrying me.'

CHAPTER NINE

'MARRY you? You're joking, of course.' Anne felt a quick stab of pain that he could make a joke of something she had dreamed of lovingly night after night.

Mark turned and came back to her, a glass in each hand. The last of the setting sun's rays, pouring in through the window, fell on his face, softening the lines of strain, giving it a look of youthful eagerness. He handed her the sherry, then took a long drink of his whisky and put the glass on the floor beside him as he sat down facing her. He leaned forward.

'Joking? No, I'm not joking, Annie. I may have expressed myself clumsily, but I've never been more serious. It's my lifeline. My only hope of keeping my son with me. You and I get along so well, and Matt thinks the world of you already. Oh, Annie, don't you see? It's the perfect solution. What about it?'

Anne took a gulp of sherry and put down the glass. As the full meaning of Mark's words dawned on her she wanted to cry out with resentment and hurt pride. That was how he thought of her—as a 'solution'. No word of love or even affection; she was just to be fitted neatly into his plan. For some reason Keith's words came back to her: 'You're too soft-hearted... People take advantage of you.'

Mark's dark eyes were on her own, hopefully. He was awaiting an answer, confident of what it would be.

Anne drew a long, steadying breath. 'Yes, I see that a wife might turn the custody suit in your favour and that I am the obvious candidate. Anne, the ultimate do-gooder, the girl who can be relied on to help out in a crisis.' Her pain didn't sound in her voice, only her anger.

Mark fell back in his chair, staring at her as if she had dealt him a blow. 'Oh, Lord, I see I've made a horrible mess of this.' He groaned.

'I got so steamed up with the idea and I had to blurt it out to you. All I could think of was how wonderful it would be if we were married, if we were a family. These last days have been something I've never known before. We've all been so happy together. But I swear to you, Annie—' he reached forward and gripped both her hands so hard that they hurt '—that I never once thought of taking you for granted.'

Releasing her hands from his, she got up and switched on the light. The sunset provided a romantic backdrop to a proposal of marriage. But this wasn't romantic, it was severely practical. She sat down again and in the sudden brilliant light her eyes flashed very deep blue.

'Are you still in love with Trudi King?'

His head jerked up. His jaw tightened. 'What the hell has she got to do with it? We're finished—washed up. I told you.'

'There isn't any chance of making up your quarrel?'

The anger was back in his face again. 'No, there isn't,' he shouted.

Anne felt a heavy weight in her breast. She was digging her own grave. She wanted to grab at Mark's proposal, to cry, Yes, yes, of course I'll marry you. All her natural instincts urged her to help him, to make the look of misery disappear from his face, to throw her arms round him and know that he was hers. But he wouldn't be hers. She knew now, for sure, that he didn't love her. That was quite clear. He saw her in a cosy picture of a happy family. But he still loved another woman. The bitter anger he had just shown proved that. Even the sound of Trudi King's name touched him on a raw wound.

Moments passed in silence. Anne felt an almost unbearable tension between them. At last Mark said heavily, 'I should have thought we'd both had enough of what is called love. If I'd suddenly told you I was in love with you, would you have believed me? No, you wouldn't. You'd have thought I was using emotional blackmail. I like you. I like

everything about you. And liking is often more lasting than so-called love.'

She shivered. 'I couldn't,' she whispered. 'It sounds so cold, so matter-of-fact. Love may not mean anything to you, but I couldn't marry without it.'

'And what is love? You tell me. I know that you're a beautiful, appealing girl, Annie, and—as you may have noticed—I have great difficulty in keeping my hands off you. I thought you were another man's girl. If I'd known sooner that you weren't, things might have been very different. No, my sweet Annie, I don't anticipate any problems there.' A mischievous smile touched his lips. 'Do you?'

His eyes held hers in a long look that made her pulses beat heavily and sent the blood rushing to her cheeks. He hadn't failed to notice her response when he had kissed her.

'But that's only part of love,' she said rather desperately. 'What you'd feel for any pretty girl.' But she knew that if he took her in his arms now and told her he loved her she would believe him, because she wanted to. She felt as if she was being torn in two. 'I—I can't...' she began.'

He put a finger over her lips. 'Shh, sweetheart. I've rushed you abominably. We won't talk about it any more for the present. Did you say Mrs T had left us some supper? I think we're both hungry. Come along, let's go and eat.'

He pulled her up out of her chair and linked his arm with hers. 'I know I've said this before, but I must say it again. I think you're quite the nicest girl I've ever known, Annie,' he said, squeezing her arm as he led her across the room.

It wasn't right, her heart told her. He was doing his best to win her over but it was all too controlled, too calculated. They might as well have been arranging a business deal.

The phone buzzed as they reached the door. Mark went back to take the call, and when it was plain that it had nothing to do with her Anne went on to the kitchen and took the casserole out of the oven. Everything was ready when Mark joined her.

'That was my sister,' he said, helping them both to the casserole, which smelled delicious. 'Her husband has arrived and her mother-in-law is recovering. Frances sounded much more cheerful. She asked if you were still with me and said, "You should hold onto that girl, Mark; she's right for you." I told you I wasn't sure you'd agree.' He glanced across the table at Anne, lifting his eyebrows, making the statement into a question.

Anne could think of nothing to reply so she remained silent and after waiting for a few moments he gave a slight shrug and went on, 'Frances is going home to Sussex tomorrow, to prepare a room for her mother-in-law. John's staying with his mother and will drive her home when she's fit to travel. Frances wanted to make sure that I was taking Matt back to school tomorrow and that I'd see David and take some messages from her. David is her son, by the way—the same age as Matt and they're great pals. I plan to have them both at the cottage for part of the summer holidays.'

Anne saw the sudden shadow pass over his face and felt a sharp pang of fear—the same fear that Mark must be feeling: would Matthew still be with him by the end of the summer holidays?

But he wasn't going to appeal to her pity. He went on to talk quite naturally about the school, which was in Sussex, near to his sister's home, and described the nineteenth-century mansion which had been cleverly developed into a preparatory school, and the Downs and the

countryside around. Anne was grateful to him for keeping the conversation away from anything personal. She felt sure she would not be able to take any more tonight.

When they'd finished coffee, she said, 'I think I'll have an early night and get everything packed and ready to start tomorrow.'

'Yes, we must plan for tomorrow,' Mark said in a businesslike tone. 'Can you be ready to make an early start? I meant to tell you before—I've booked a car for you for eight o'clock. That should avoid at least some of the rush-hour traffic. I'll have to leave soon after, to get Matt to school.'

She said, 'Of course. I can leave as early as necessary. Have you found out about trains—shall I go from Paddington or Marylebone?'

'Neither,' he told her firmly. 'You are not going to wrestle with all that luggage on a train, Annie, dear. I've booked a car to take you straight home. It's a reliable service and there'll be a woman driver.'

Anne demurred, but quickly found that it was quite useless. And, truth to tell, it would be a real blessing to be taken from door to door with her video equipment, which was quite heavy, as well as her hand luggage.

Mark said tentatively, 'You're sure you have to go home?'

'Quite sure.' Anne couldn't wait to be alone, in her own home, where she could think and think, and clear the confusion in her mind.

Mark nodded. 'I thought you'd say that.'

They both stood up, and when Anne made a move to clear away the dishes Mark stopped her. He put both hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him.

'We haven't much time to spare,' he said. 'It's hell for me to let you go but I know you must have time to make up your mind.' His voice was very deep as he went on slowly, 'You know what I want, Annie, what I need. If you can give it to me, you'll come back to me very soon?'

She looked back at him, her eyes steady, candid. 'I will, Mark,' she said. 'I promise.'

Anne slept very little that night. She had determined not to try to think, or to make a decision until she reached home, but her emotions were stirred up far too chaotically to allow her to relax into sound sleep. She dozed now and again and wakened with a start, not knowing where she was until the light shining round the curtains from the street showed her faintly the outline of the bedroom with its ornate fittings and hangings.

If she accepted Mark's proposal would he expect her to live here, in a flat which would remind her at every moment of Trudi King? She *couldn't*, she thought wildly, thumping the pillow, and for the first time she burst into tears of doubt and longing, all jumbled together.

Anne slept for a couple of hours before daylight and wakened to the faint tinkle of her travelling alarm at six-thirty with an empty feeling of nerves in the pit of her stomach. A warm shower did nothing to remove it and she knew she'd have to endure it until she was well away from London.

She dressed carefully in the one dress that hadn't been worn yet. Fortunately it was the prettiest one—a white glazed cotton with tiny sprigs of forget-me-nots scattered here and there. She combed her golden curls into some sort of order, wishing she had washed them last night. It was too late now, though, and too late to remove entirely the evidence of her broken night.

When she had put in her contact lenses and done the best she could with her make-up she decided that she didn't look too bad and consoled herself with the thought that the others would be too busy preparing for their journey to Sussex to notice her appearance. She was longing for a cup of tea, and made her way to the kitchen, expecting to be the first there.

She was quite wrong. Matthew was sitting at the table in the alcove, eating toast and marmalade and showing no signs of pre-school nerves. He looked very neat in his white shirt and maroon blazer, with the school badge on the pocket. Mark looked unusual, too, in a dark suit. He was standing beside the table with a mug of coffee in his hand and he looked up and gave Anne a flashing smile which made her heart miss a beat and then thump away like mad.

Matthew replied, 'Good morning, Annie,' very correctly in answer to her greeting and she warmed towards them both. This could be the scene at many more breakfasts—if she said yes.

For a moment she was tempted, then Mrs Taylor came bustling in with a question about the number of cricket shirts Matthew would need, and the temptation passed.

The time dragged. Anne drank tea but her stomach refused to consider food. Nobody seemed to have much to say. Matthew went off to his room to collect some books he wanted to take with him and Mark escaped down to the garage with the expressed intention of checking up on petrol, but Anne felt sure that it was because he didn't want to be with her. There was nothing left to say.

She went back to the hated bedroom, where all her belongings had been deposited yesterday. Her various bits and pieces had been pushed hastily into the boot of the Jaguar and now they made an untidy heap on the white carpet. She sat on the bed and stared at them gloomily. They looked tatty and pathetic in this glamorous room.

She went out to the kitchen and procured a large plastic carrier bag from Mrs Taylor into which she packed the oddments—the mac and bathing towel and walking shoes. It was only days ago—not much more than a week—that she had stowed them away for the holiday she'd promised herself, and that holiday had turned out so very differently from the one she'd planned. It seemed like another life, before she'd met Mark again and found out about Matthew.

Her throat choked up, but she mustn't give way to the desire to weep again so she busied herself making a neat pile of everything in the hall. After that she went back, tidied the bed and with relief closed the door on the bedroom. Then she went out to say goodbye to Mrs Taylor and thank her for her attention.

Mark came looking for her. 'Is that all your luggage? I'll take it down, then. The car should be here very soon.'

Anne shook hands with Mrs Taylor and followed him out to the hall and into the lift, which just held the two of them plus her luggage. The silence between them as they were whisked downwards was agonising. Anne tried to think of something casual to say.

'It was a good idea of yours about the car,' she said lightly at last. 'I would have found that lot somewhat difficult to cope with on the train.'

The lift came to a halt. As Mark stepped out he turned to smile at her over his shoulder—an odd, enigmatic smile. 'I hope you'll come to agree that all my ideas are good ones,' he said. 'Ah, I think I can hear your car now. She's rather early.'

'Oh, I haven't said goodbye to Matthew.' Anne stepped back into the lift, but at that moment Matthew came galloping down the stairs and ran up to her, holding out a sheet of paper. 'It's for you, Annie,' he announced proudly. 'I did it with those pencils we bought in Meva...'

'Gissey,' Anne and Mark said at once, and they all laughed.

Matthew had drawn a picture of her holding a kitten and surrounded by very green grass with a very blue sky. 'It's wonderful, Matt; thank you very much,' Anne said and pressed her lips together to force back the threatening tears. 'I shall have it framed and hang it in my room.' She leaned down and hugged him. This was the worst moment of all. She clung desperately to what little poise remained.

The car was here and Mark was taking her luggage out to it. Matthew picked up her travel-bag and staggered after him. Everything was stacked in the boot of the large black Rover pulled up outside. Mark gave instructions to the young woman driver. The passenger door stood open. The moment had arrived and it would soon be over.

Leaning down to Matthew, Anne said, 'Do I get a kiss?' He grinned and planted a smacking kiss on her cheek.

As she straightened up she felt Mark's hand on her arm. 'I refuse to be left out,' he said, and, putting his arms round her, he held her tightly to him for a long moment and kissed her hard on her mouth. Then, somehow, she had got herself into the car and was fumbling blindly with her seat belt. He reached in and slipped down the lock. 'Don't forget,' he whispered as he closed the door.

'OK?' the driver said, putting the car into gear.

Anne nodded. Her throat was tight and she couldn't speak. As the Rover glided away she knew that Mark and Matthew were watching it go. Perhaps Matthew was waving, she thought, and pulled down the window to wave back. Her one thought, as the big car joined the traffic for the north, was, Why am I doing this? Why am I leaving them?

She found that she didn't know the answer.

Less than two hours later Anne was putting her key in the lock of her own front door and the black Rover was on its way back to London.

She remembered very little about the journey. The car had been comfortable, the young woman driver pleasant but not chatty, and once on the M40 she had put some light, tuneful music on the stereo and Anne had rested her head back and closed her eyes, feeling painfully conscious that every mile they covered was taking her further away from where she wanted to be—with Mark and Matthew—and that the ache inside her was getting worse all the time. Now, as she carried her luggage inside and closed the front door behind her, she wondered how she could have needed to come home, to be alone and think everything out and decide. There was no logical process involved. All she knew was that she loved Mark and that she must be with him. If he wanted her and needed her that was enough. She would go back to him.

The resolve sent such a wave of euphoria flooding through her that she almost turned round and caught the next train back to London. If she couldn't do that she must speak to Mark now, immediately—hear his voice, tell him she was coming back. Running into the kitchen, she grabbed the receiver from the telephone on the wall. Then, slowly, she replaced it.

Idiot! she told herself. Mark would be somewhere in Sussex by now, and anyway she didn't know his phone number. She had the card he had given her—that would have his phone number on it. She'd ring him this evening and tomorrow she would see him again.

Hugging that thought to her, she brought her mind back to practical matters. In the hall she gathered up the letters scattered on the mat and took them, with her travel-bag, to the kitchen. The letters were mostly advertisements, certainly nothing of any importance- except a letter

of thanks and appreciation from Roger French enclosing a nice cheque for her work in Cornwall. She must remember to ring Roger about the job he had offered her. How surprised he'd be to hear about the outcome of their Cornish recording session!

She folded the cheque inside the letter and tucked it in her handbag to take to the bank. Then she rescued Matthew's drawing of herself and the kitten from her travel-bag and tipped the rest of the contents out. She stuffed all the clothes she'd worn into the washing machine. They would dry in the sun this afternoon and be ready to pack and take with her tomorrow.

The house was gloomy and felt un-lived-in, even after such a short time. Refusing to let herself be depressed by it, Anne propped Matthew's drawing up on the mantelpiece, where the bright colours made a cheerful note against the once-white wall. She made a mug of coffee and drank it while she looked at the picture. This time next week Matthew would be her very own family. The thought made her forget the shabby old house and look ahead to the future and all the love and care she could give both father and son.

Later on she came back to making a decision about the house. She might as well put it on the market now; she wouldn't be living in it herself after tonight. She would be married as soon as Mark could arrange it- there was no time to be lost if they were to present themselves as a married couple at the custody hearing.

A married couple! How wonderful that sounded! She was filled with a warm swell of love for Mark. She would make him happy, just by loving him enough, and in time, perhaps, he would come to love her.

She clung to that hope as she went up to her bedroom to search out her birth certificate, which would be required, she supposed, when applying for a marriage licence. Having found it at last, she tidied herself up, resolving to wash her hair as soon as she got in from the

town. She planned that when she'd been to the bank she'd call in at the best-known estate agent and have a talk to someone about the sale of the house. Later she'd treat herself to a slap-up lunch and then, perhaps, look for a new dress to wear tomorrow—something that would be right for London. Oh, how exciting everything was!

Anne closed the front door of the dark old house, stepped out into the sunshine and set off for the town centre, walking on air.

CHAPTER TEN

THE taxi from Marylebone nosed its way slowly through the crush of the London traffic towards South Kensington at eleven o'clock the following morning. Anne sat bolt upright at the back, staring through the window unseeingly, lacing her fingers in her lap and trying to ignore the butterflies swooping around her stomach.

If only she'd been able to speak to Mark on the phone last night! But all her attempts had been greeted by Mrs Taylor's voice on the answering machine informing her that Mr Rayne was unable to take her call but if she cared to leave a message etcetera, etcetera. She had lost count of the number of times she had rung his number without success.

At one o'clock, in desperation, she had recorded a brief message: 'Mark, this is Annie. I'm coming to London tomorrow. Please ring me back. It doesn't matter how late.' She had ended by giving her phone number, in case he'd lost it.

She hadn't been to bed at all. The phone was in the sitting room and there was no extension in her bedroom. She'd settled down on the sofa in the sitting room, wrapping herself in a duvet and deriving some comfort from the knowledge that her head was resting on the cushion where Mark's dark head had lain on that first night, when it had all started.

She'd slept very little, starting up at every slight sound, inside the house or out: the squeal of a car's brakes in the distance, a plane passing overhead, the creak of old floorboards on the protesting rattle of plumbing that should have been renewed years ago.

Lying awake, listening for the phone that didn't ring, Anne had wished over and over again that she hadn't chosen to come home. It

had been a ghastly mistake. The night had dragged on miserably, and there had been no phone call from Mark.

In the morning, as she'd dressed and drunk cups of tea, she'd tried to regain the euphoria she'd felt yesterday, telling herself that after all nothing had really changed. There might have been dozens of reasons why Mark hadn't got her message.

But she hadn't been able to help feeling vaguely uneasy, and now, as the taxi bore her nearer and nearer to him, doubts began to crowd in on her. What if he wasn't at the flat when she got there? What if the legal situation had changed and Mark found that he didn't need a wife after all? He wouldn't expect her to come rushing back to him the very next day. He might have phoned this morning, after, she'd left for the station, to tell her not to come.

She wasn't happy about the suit she had bought yesterday either. In the shop she had fallen in love with its sleek lines and its colour—a little lighter than navy blue, with narrow white piping on the neck and short sleeves. Now she doubted if it was sophisticated enough for London.

Rain had been threatening all the way down in the train and now it had started in earnest, streaming down the taxi window. Her new suit was going to suffer; she'd brought no protection against the weather. No mac, not even an umbrella. All she had with her was a small overnight case; she'd lacked the confidence to come back to Mark laden with cases and bags.

Anyway, if she was to be married next week she would need to go on a shopping expedition in London.

That 'if' had somehow grown out of all proportion on the train journey and now, as the taxi drew up outside Mark's flat, she began to wonder why she was here at all.

She picked up her overnight case and her handbag, paid the driver and stepped out, running for shelter up the steps to the canopy over the front entrance to the flats. She took several deep breaths to steady herself but her throat was tight and her hands were clammy as she pressed the button beside the card marked 'Rayne'.

Mrs Taylor's voice came through the intercom. When Anne announced herself there seemed to be a slight hesitation before the housekeeper said, 'Miss Grey—oh, yes, please come up.' The solid front door clicked open.

When Anne stepped out of the lift she found the housekeeper waiting for her in the corridor. 'Hello, Miss Grey, nice to see you again.' She smiled, but she seemed a trifle embarrassed. 'Mr Rayne is out at present. Does he expect you?'

Anne swallowed hard. This was what she'd been afraid of. 'Well, not exactly,' she said. 'But I'll come in and wait for him.'

'Of course,' Mrs Taylor said. 'What a shocking morning—I hope you haven't got wet.' She made small talk about the weather as she opened the door of the flat and led Anne down the long corridor to the door at the end of it.

As they passed the other doors Anne noticed a stack of expensive-looking luggage outside one of them. Oh, goodness! Had Mark got visitors? That would be too awful. Well, she'd just have to wait and see what happened.

Mrs Taylor ushered her into the drawing room and Anne could see why Mark found it intimidating. It was a huge room, furnished showily in white and scarlet. Anne didn't look carefully round; she just hated the room on sight. She sat down on the edge of a deep chair covered in scarlet satin and put her case beside her on the floor.

'I'll bring you some coffee,' Mrs Taylor said, with a smile that looked almost pitying, and went out of the room.

Anne watched the rain pouring down the long windows curtained with scarlet velvet and gold swags, and thought dismally that the morning was turning into a nightmare. If only Mark would come and take her off to his cosy study, where they could talk.

The door opened and a very tall woman came in. She'd obviously been washing her hair and it lay in black strands against her perfect face. She wore a long wrap of white satin, belted in round a tiny waist and hanging a little open as she moved, to reveal that she was wearing nothing beneath. She was possibly the most beautiful girl that Anne had ever seen. She was also, undeniably, Miss Trudi King.

She stopped when she saw Anne and gave her a slow scrutiny from head to foot. 'Ah,' she said, in a slightly husky voice, 'you must be the au pair girl from the agency. Mark said he'd ask them to send someone along.' She came closer.

'Swedish, are you?' She touched one of Anne's golden curls. 'Well, Mr Rayne won't be in just yet but perhaps you and I can fix things up between us. I'm Miss King, Mr Rayne's fiancée. We are to be married next week, so I shall be taking over the domestic arrangements here.'

Anne was slowly, very slowly, moving into an enormous black hole which would finally swallow her up. She couldn't move, couldn't speak.

Trudi King went over to a secretaire and took out a notepad and gold pencil. 'Now, then,' she said as she came back and sank gracefully into a chair beside Anne, 'let's go into some details. Have you brought a form from the agency? May I have it, please? It will give me some idea of whether you're suitable or not. If not there will be no need to bother Mr Rayne with the matter.'

With an enormous effort Anne got to her feet and picked up her case and handbag. Moving like a clockwork doll, she managed to reach the door, where she turned.

'No,' she said, in a voice that she didn't recognise as her own, 'there will be no need at all to bother Mr Rayne. Good morning, Miss King.' She closed the door carefully behind her and didn't see the look of amused triumph on Trudi King's beautiful face.

Anne's one thought was that she must get right away from this place quickly, into the middle of a crowd, where she would be anonymous. When she reached the forecourt of the flats she saw a bus approaching and ran out to join the small crowd of women who seemed to be waiting for it.

As she climbed in after them she had no idea where the bus would take her but she didn't care very much. Sitting shivering, nervous and damp, she rubbed a patch of window clear of mist and peered out to see if there were any places she could recognise. Oxford Street she knew, from shopping expeditions over the years, and now she had her first bit of luck that day. The bus took her to Selfridges, and in the crowded interior of the great store she felt safe.

She followed signs which led her to a coffee-shop, bought a large beaker of black coffee and carried it to a table in a corner^ where she sipped the hot, slightly bitter drink and tried to decide what to do next.

The sensible thing would be to go home, forget all about this unhappy episode and take up her life where she had left it, before she'd had that fateful summons to Cornwall.

But she couldn't risk going home yet. There would be the constant danger of Mark phoning her, trying to explain, even to apologise, and

if she heard his voice before she'd got over the shock she thought she would die.

The worst thing of all was that she had nobody but herself to blame. If only she hadn't been so stupidly oversensitive she would be with Mark now, and that ghastly Trudi King wouldn't be in possession of the flat— and Mark. Oh, what a fool she'd been.

No, she couldn't go home yet. Then—what? Find a room in a small hotel? She wouldn't have the least idea where to start looking. A huge wave of loneliness and depression broke over her and she fumbled in her handbag for a handkerchief.

Then she had her second bit of luck.

Roger's letter, which had enclosed the cheque, was still there. It seemed like a lifeline as she remembered that he'd offered her a job. Praying that they might have come back from Scotland, she found a phone and dialled the number on the letter-heading.

When she heard Philippa's voice her knees went to jelly. 'It's Anne,' she whispered.

'Anne!' Philippa screamed. 'How terrific! We were just talking about you. Are you coming to see us? Where are you? Do you know where we are? I'll tell you the best way to come.'

Perhaps, Anne thought as she put the receiver down, she would manage to crawl out of the black hole after all.

On her way out of the store she bought an umbrella. Then, following Philippa's instructions, she found her way to the studio, which was in Tottenham Court Road over a secondhand bookshop.

Philippa was waiting for her at the top of a flight of rickety wooden stairs. In canary-yellow trousers and an emerald-green top she made a

bright splash of colour in the gloom of the old building. She threw her arms round Anne and kissed her enthusiastically.

'Come and see the boys; they're all in the studio.' She tucked her arm through Anne's and opened a door on her right. 'All except Toby—he's away on a course.' She pulled a face and Anne remembered how she and Roger's young assistant had obviously fancied each other.

Anne hesitated in the open doorway, looking in at the studio, which seemed a little like her editing suite at home, only about ten times as large. The team were all there, busily at work—Bob, with his wrist still in plaster, Steve, scribbling notes on a pad, and Roger, his thin, clever face under its thatch of red hair frowning into a row of monitor screens. A warm liking for them all touched Anne's heart. It was so good to be with friends again.

'Here she is,' Philippa announced, and they all looked up and then crowded round her, pleased and welcoming. Philippa found a wooden chair for her and then produced coffee for everyone.

News was exchanged and it was a relief to Anne to find that they were much more interested in their own news than in hers, and when she had answered their queries very vaguely Roger began to tell her about the new series he was planning.

'It's going to be a follow-on from the mystery and crime writers. Still writers, only this time science-fiction writers. Sci-fi seems popular just now. We were just getting started, and Toby had got a number of interviews arranged with the writers—the ones who live in London—but now he's had to go off and it's left me in rather a spot. I don't know what you're doing at present, Anne, but if you could help me out by doing some interviewing, I'd be grateful. Nothing complicated—I'll explain it to you later on, if you're interested.'

Interested! To have a job that would take her mind off the black hole looming before her, to be needed and useful! 'I'd like to try,' she said.

Roger didn't waste time. Ten minutes later Anne was one of the team again. She had even found somewhere to stay, for Philippa was looking out for a third girl for her flat and Anne was the very person. 'Tessa's on holiday just now, so we'll have the place to ourselves for a time.'

After a sandwich lunch, Roger gave Anne a list of names and addresses and telephone numbers.

'They've already expressed interest in taking part in the series and now I want to get it on a firmer footing- confirm dates, reassure them that their houses are not going to be turned upside down, answer their questions—that sort of thing. You'll find all the particulars of them* here—' he patted a thick folder '—and you can start on the interviews on Monday. Toby made the appointments before he left.'

He gave her his encouraging grin which she remembered so well from that other time they had worked together—but she didn't want to remember that.

Anne installed herself with a pad, a pencil and the folder in a small office down the landing from the studio and began to study the notes Roger had given her.

It was the worst afternoon of her life. All she wanted to do was to crawl into the black hole and sob out her misery and self-pity. But she had taken on a job and she forced herself to concentrate.

Once or twice the typed words blurred before her eyes and the ache in her chest seemed more than she could bear. But somehow the hours passed, and when Philippa came in to say that it was time to go home she'd memorised most of what was in the folder.

'I think you should lay off now,' Philippa said. 'You look rotten. Has this been too much for you?' She flicked at the folder. Then she moved closer, her shrewd little eyes on Anne's face. 'Or is something else wrong?'

'I'm fine,' Anne said. 'Let's go, then. I can finish this lot at home.' She picked up the folder and followed Philippa into the long studio, where the three men were still sitting in front of the row of monitors.

'They'll be there till all hours,' Philippa whispered over her shoulder. 'They're working to a deadline, editing the last series.' At the door she stopped and sang out, 'Goodnight, chaps, we're off. Don't work too late.'

Anne echoed, 'Goodnight,' and turned to follow Philippa.

Then it happened. Suddenly a man's deep voice sounded from a loudspeaker, saying words Anne couldn't take in. Her head shot round to the large screen at the end of the row of small monitors and she was seeing Mark's face, looking into his dark, long-lashed eyes just as she had looked into them in her zoom lens at the wedding.

She let out a gasp as the floor rocked beneath her and she thought she was going to faint. Then Philippa's arm was around her and she was out on the cool landing and the studio door was closed behind them.

Anne hung onto the top of the stair-rail until the shaking had stopped. 'I'm OK,' she said then. 'It was just...'

'I know,' Philippa said quietly. She had seen the picture on the screen too. 'Come on, let's get home and get something to eat. You'll feel better with something inside you, as my old granny used to say.'

Philippa's flat was on the top floor of an old house in Bloomsbury, within easy walking distance of the studio. In the large, comfortable sitting room she pushed Anne into a chair and brought drinks for

them both. She sat down in a chair opposite and looked hard at Anne's white face. 'It's Mark Rayne, isn't it?' she said. 'Did something happen this morning?'

Anne spluttered over her drink. 'H-how did you know?' There was no point in denying it.

'Well, you didn't have to be one of Mark Rayne's detectives to see that something was going on when we were in Cornwall. Roger and I both noticed the way he looked at you.-'

'But he didn't—' Anne began, but Philippa went on.

'You came in this morning looking as if you'd been in a car crash, and I saw the way you reacted to that clip in the studio just now.' She leaned forward. 'You've been as tense as a board all afternoon, Anne. Want to talk about it, lovie? It always helps.'

The practical kindness was too much for Anne. Tears gathered thickly in her eyes and it all came rushing out, from the very beginning.

Philippa listened in silence, and at the end she said, 'Well, if it had been me I'd have grabbed him when he asked me, but if he could go back to that other girl so soon I don't think he's worth breaking your heart over.' She sighed. 'I don't see that you can do anything now but keep yourself busy and know that we're your friends—and that there are a lot more charmers like Mark Rayne around.'

Anne slept soundly in the small bedroom that night and, on waking, guessed that Philippa had slipped a sleeping pill into her milky drink. The rain had cleared away and the sun was shining again. Perhaps that was a good omen, she thought. Her life recently seemed to have been ruled by pure chance, so why not?

She washed in the shared bathroom and put on the blue suit, which she had washed the night before and had dried overnight. Feeling more ready to face the world than she had done when she'd gone to bed, she followed the wonderful smell of coffee to the kitchen, where Philippa was making toast.

Anne had, she thought, memorised all the details of the writers she was going to visit next week, so she spent the day at the studio helping Philippa in the office with small tasks such as cleaning out cupboards and trekking to Hackney with her to pick up a box of cassettes. She was thankful that she wasn't asked to help with the editing. If she saw Mark's face on the screen again she didn't know whether her new resolve to be cheerful would survive.

At four o'clock she made tea, and afterwards Roger came to look for her in the tiny kitchenette where she was washing the cups.

'I've got an extra job for you tomorrow, Anne. There was a phone call when you were out from a chap I want to get for the sci-fi series. His name's Richard Quinton and he's a first-rate writer—I like his work very much. He's leaving London soon and tomorrow morning is the last time he has available. He lives in a delightful cottage down by the river—just right for "atmosphere".

'I'm afraid I haven't had time to get out a dossier for him, but you could play it by ear, couldn't you? Anyway, go along at ten tomorrow and see what you can do. He's a very nice chap; you'll get on with him.' He handed Anne a slip of paper and a road map of central London before he went back to his monitor screen.

Philippa was disappointed when Anne told her about the interview arranged for the following morning. 'I thought we might go and do some shopping as it's Saturday,' she said.

'Couldn't we go in the afternoon?' Anne suggested. 'I want to buy a new dress. I can't go on wearing this blue thing much longer.'

Philippa went a little pink and admitted that Toby was taking her out to lunch.

'That's fine,' Anne said. 'Bring him back with you. I'd love to see him again.'

When she went to bed that night Anne felt that she might be over the worst. At least she'd managed not to dissolve into tears when someone spoke to her.

But she'd complimented herself too soon. Without a sleeping pill she was awake most of the night, stuffing her face into a pillow so that she wouldn't disturb Philippa in the next room.

Next morning was dark and raining again, and as Anne stepped off the bus in Chelsea she felt as wretched as the weather. She paused at the gate of a small house with a green front door, trying to summon up a cheerful smile as she put her umbrella down.

A pretty young woman with glossy brown hair and a welcoming smile opened the door to her knock. 'Miss Grey? What a morning! Are you wet? Let me take your umbrella.' She was walking towards the foot of the stairs as she spoke. 'Mr Quinton is waiting for you. He's in the library—the first room on the left at the top of the stairs.'

Anne put on her interviewer's smile and thanked her. She held onto the banister as she climbed the stairs and hesitated outside the door on the landing. She'd done interviews before, but not when she was feeling like a wet rag and with a huge, heavy lump in her chest.

She drew in a breath, tapped and walked in.

The room was shadowy—the window was half obscured by the branch of a tall flowering cherry tree. There was a bookcase covering the whole of the wall on the right and a tall man was standing before it, his back to her.

'Good morning, Mr Quinton.' Heavens, how squeaky she sounded!

The man turned towards her very slowly. 'Hello, Annie,' he said.

Mark! She hung onto the first thing she could reach—the back of a leather chair. 'Wh-what are you doing here?' she whispered.

He came towards her. 'Waiting for you,' he said. 'We have a lot to discuss—weddings, for instance.'

'I don't...' she began, but his arms were round her and he was holding her close, his cheek pressed against the damp tumble of her gold curls.

'Oh, darling, never run out on me again. I thought I'd lost you. The last two days have been hell. I'm free to tell you now that I love you—I've wanted you for quite a long time and now I'm reduced to a nervous wreck because I haven't been able to tell you before.' His lips were very close to hers. 'Tell me how I can make you love me.'

Her arms went up round his neck. 'I do love you,' she said. 'I think I've always loved you. That's how it seems.'

He made a small sound, like a moan, and then he was kissing her—so fiercely that she could hardly breathe.

After a long time, without knowing how she'd got there, Anne found that they were together on a cushiony leather sofa and that she was cradled in Mark's arms.

'What a lot of time we've wasted,' he said, stroking her curls back behind her ears and planting a kiss on each lobe in turn. 'And what a muddle it's been. I stayed overnight with Frances after I left Matt at school and I got back on Thursday morning to find Trudi in occupation. She'd just come back as if nothing had happened.'

'She was at the flat when I got there,' Anne said. 'She told me you were going to be married.' She sat up suddenly. 'You're not going to marry her, are you?'

His arms tightened round her. 'God, no. What there was between Trudi and me was all over, finally, the night before the wedding—where you and I first met. She'd promised to stay at the cottage with Matthew, but when her agent turned up to offer her some modelling job or other abroad she just walked out with him and left Matt on his own.'

Anne's eyes widened. 'She did that? Then that was why Matthew was so nervous that first night. Was he really alone all night?'

Mark shook his head. 'Not for very long. When Trudi phoned me in London to tell me she was going I exceeded the speed limit all the way down to the cottage, picked up a very frightened little boy and drove back to Brighton to leave him with Frances. Then I had a quick shower at the flat in London, got into my glad rags and managed to get myself up to Warwickshire in time for the wedding. No, Trudi and I were really finished. Why she came back so blatantly I'll never know.'

Anne looked up at him from under her eyelashes. 'Your fatal charm, perhaps?'

He kissed her long and hard as a punishment for that, and then went on, 'After she'd gone I heard your message on the answering machine and put it all together—with Mrs Taylor's help. Poor woman, she

didn't know what was going on. I think I went demented after that. To know that you'd been back to the flat and that I'd only missed you by half an hour or so—God, it was maddening. I thought you must have gone back home.'

'I couldn't,' Anne said. 'I was terrified that if you rang up when I was there to tell me you were marrying Trudi after all and that you wouldn't have to trouble me I should die.' He picked up one of her curls and rubbed it against his cheek. If it hadn't been Mark she might have thought he was crying. 'So what did you do?' she asked.

'I wore the phone out ringing your number,' he went on. 'By six o'clock in the morning I thought that you didn't want to talk to me, so I got in the car and arrived outside your house in time to see a man from an estate agent putting up a "For Sale" sign. At the agent's office they told me they hadn't got any other address for you.

'By then I wasn't thinking logically at all, but suddenly I remembered that you'd said you'd been offered a job by Roger French. It was a long shot but I hit the target at last. I had Roger's number in my wallet and we had a talk on the phone. I think he'd guessed something had been bothering you. I told him I must somehow get you alone to talk. He was very understanding and we cooked up this scheme between us.' He waved a hand round the room. 'This is Roger's house and it was his wife who let you in.'

Anne was feeling drunk with happiness. She laughed, laying her head in the hollow of his neck, feeling the warmth of his skin against her cheek. 'So there isn't a famous sci-fi writer called Richard Quinton after all. I'm quite disappointed.'

'My middle name's Quinton,' he told her. 'And I could always try my hand at science fiction if you're really keen.'

She denied it laughingly and then looked up into his face, and the laughter died away as she saw the flame of love burning in his dark eyes.

'Did you really fall in love with me when we first met?' he wanted to know.

She cuddled closer to him. 'Before that. I saw your photograph in the local paper. That was enough.'

'A good story!' he scoffed.

'What's your story, then?' she retorted.

'I probably fell in love with you when I watched you march up the path and into the church, after I'd been abominably rude to you and you'd squashed me flat. But I finally realised I was hooked when you took pity on me and let me sleep on your sofa that night.

'You may think it was on the rebound, when I'd just broken up with Trudi, but I knew that at last I'd found the girl I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. A girl who was beautiful and kind and would never let me down. A girl who wasn't putting on a calculated act to get what she wanted.'

He kissed both her eyelids, very gently. 'I carried that picture of you away with me the next morning and it's been with me ever since. That was why I bawled you out once or twice when you seemed to be falling short of the picture.'

'I don't think I like being on a pedestal,' she said with a grin. 'And you were perfectly horrid to me.'

He nodded. 'I know,' he said. 'I've got a hell of a temper. Will you be able to put up with me? I was frustrated, you see. I wanted to tell you how I felt but there were two hurdles to be got over. The first one was

that you were engaged already, and I've never thought much of chaps who pinch other chaps' girls when the other chaps are away—if you know what I mean.'

Anne giggled. 'But I told you in the end.'

'Yes,' he said darkly, 'but it had all happened so fast that I wanted to be very careful not to scare you off completely. And then the custody thing came up and a sudden declaration of undying passion would have looked very phoney to you if I'd then asked you to marry me and you'd realised how useful being married would be to me.'

She sighed. 'Yes, I suppose so. But I wish you had told me that you loved me.'

He lifted dark brows. 'Would you have believed me?'

'Oh, yes, I would,' she said. 'You see, I needed an excuse to say yes.' He groaned. 'I'll never understand women. Just tell me you'll marry me—that's the most important thing at the moment.'

There was a little silence, then Anne said, 'Oh, yes, of course, there's still the custody suit.'

He laughed triumphantly. 'That's my second hurdle removed. There isn't going to be any custody suit. I heard this morning that Lorna has been educating her new husband in British culture before they leave for America. The poor fellow fell down the steps of the Tate Gallery a couple of days ago and broke a leg and bent a few ribs. He's very sorry for himself and has completely lost interest in adopting anyone. I doubt if Lorna has ever been keen on the idea and in the end they decided to call off the whole thing.'

'Oh, Mark, I'm so glad.' Anne's deep blue eyes were shining. 'Yes, of course we'll be married—as soon as you like. We must wait for the

school holidays, though. Oh, and I've promised to do some interviews for Roger. I can't let him down.'

'OK, I'll allow you to keep your promise, my conscientious one. So long as the interviews aren't like this one.' He demonstrated exactly what he meant.

After some time he said, 'And I want to take you to Malta and show you off to my parents. My father will adore you and my mother will be happy at last. I don't think she ever approved of my choice of women.'

'Oh, I do hope she likes me.' For a moment she felt the old twinge of doubt as she said, 'And Matthew- will he be glad, do you think?'

'He'll be thrilled. He made me promise, before I left him, that you'd come back.'

'And were you so sure I would?' she asked demurely.

He pulled her closer and kissed her hungrily. Then he said, 'I convinced myself that I could persuade you.' He took a tiny box from his pocket and slipped a ring onto her finger. 'Was I right?'

Anne gasped, 'Oh, Mark, darling, it's the most beautiful ring I've ever seen. Thank you, thank you.' She held her hand up to admire the ring and her eyes sparkled as blue as the single perfect sapphire on her finger. She melted into his arms and there was mischief as well as adoration in the smile she gave him. 'You were quite right,' she murmured happily, and held up her face for another kiss.

EPILOGUE

THE Jaguar skimmed up the steep hill like a bird, swooped round into the parking space beside the cottage and stopped. Mark switched off the engine with a smile of satisfaction, remarking to nobody in particular that the old Jag had lots of life in her yet.

'Everyone happy?' He looked round at his little family. His wife was leaning back in the corner of the passenger seat, her golden head resting on a cushion, her eyes closed, a soft smile on her lips. She'd been half-asleep since they'd left their new home in Chelsea—probably because she'd been up very late packing for them all for a month's stay.

In the back of the car Matthew was jiggling the doorhandle, waiting for the lock to be released. Beside him, in his car-seat, his young brother Luke, aged ten months, was fast asleep, covered by a light blanket.

Anne opened her eyes. 'Oh, we're here—that's great.' She never got tired of their holidays at the cottage.

Matthew leaned forward and touched her shoulder, putting his finger to his lips. 'Shh, Luke's gone off to sleep,' he whispered. Matthew had established himself as playmate and nursemaid to Luke. He'd been fascinated by the baby from the very beginning and considered himself very much the big brother. Each school holiday he taught Luke something new. At present he was encouraging him to pull himself up, hanging onto the bar of his cot.

Anne climbed out of the car. 'Will you bring Luke up, darling?' she asked Mark. 'I'll go in and see if Mrs Marr has done her stuff.'

She looked up affectionately at the cottage. It had not changed very much since the first time she'd seen it, more than two years ago, though the jungle of shrubs in the front garden had been trimmed and

the path weeded, and a two-room extension had been added on one side. Matthew had taken over the top room and there was an extra bed there for David, when he came to stay.

The room below was the visitors' room, and was popular with their friends in the summer months. Andrew and Elizabeth had been here last summer, and Frances, with her husband and David, was expected tomorrow. Mark had writing friends too, who sometimes descended on them.

Anne often hugged herself happily when she thought how lucky she was to have such a wonderful circle of friends as well as the best family in the world. She often called at the studio in London to hear the team's news and take Philippa out for coffee, and the house Mark had bought in Chelsea was not far from Roger's cottage. Anne and Roger's wife, Clare, were fast friends and the couples visited each others' houses when babysitters were available.

She let herself in with her key and Matthew came prancing after her and ran upstairs. Anne followed more slowly, up to the small room which had once been Matthew's. This was now Luke's room, next to hers and Mark's. It all fitted in splendidly.

The windows were open and the August sun flooded in. Mrs Marr, from the village, had aired all the beds, bless her. Luke's mattress was spread over the side of his cot and she put a hand on it, to make sure it had been thoroughly aired, and then called down through the window to Mark.

'Still asleep?' He lifted both thumbs. 'Bring him up, then—and mind you don't wake him.'

A minute or two later Mark appeared in the doorway with his bundle and deposited it carefully in the cot, grinning with pride. 'Not a peep out of him,' he whispered.

It was very warm in the room. Anne loosened the blanket round the sleeping child and they both stood looking down at him. Mark said in a low voice, 'He looks too much like a cherub, with that golden hair and blue eyes. I bet he'll turn out to be a tearaway.'

'No, he won't,' Anne objected. 'He'll be just perfect- like Matthew.' She rested her head against Mark's shoulder and his arm went round her as they tiptoed into their own room.

Again the mattress and the duvet had obviously been aired by the good Mrs Marr. Anne straightened the bed while Mark rummaged in the top drawer of the dressing chest. 'Have I got a clean shirt?'

'Not until you bring the bags up,' Anne said absently, her eyes fixed on the drawing which had been stuck onto the wall above their bed. As he turned to go she lifted an arm. 'Mark, come and look at this.' He took her hand and joined her, slipping an arm round her waist, and together they stared at Matthew's drawing.

It was an illustrated text, beautifully coloured, with the words, scripted neatly, surrounded by flowers and tiny creatures—rabbits, squirrels, seagulls. Matthew, at nine, was proud of his skill as an artist and was determined to try his hand at graphics on Mark's computer in the study.

Anne's eyes widened as she read the text.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, The Bed be blest that I lie on.

She gurgled with laughter. 'Oh, Mark, do you think it's a broad hint? It couldn't be, could it?'

Mark grinned. 'The young devil. I wouldn't put it past him. They're incredibly knowing at his age these days.'

Suddenly they both fell silent.

Then Anne looked up into her husband's face, blue eyes dancing, cheeks a little pink. 'Do you think we should take the hint? How do you feel about it?'

Mark's voice was not very steady as he said, 'I'm all for it, if you are.'

She nodded several times. 'The only question,' she said slowly, 'is whether it should be John—or Joanna.'

Mark laid his cheek on the top of her bright head. He appeared to consider. Then he said, 'I believe there are twins in my family. Would that be a solution?'

Anne reached up and drew his head lower, until his mouth was touching hers. 'The very best,' she whispered dreamily.