

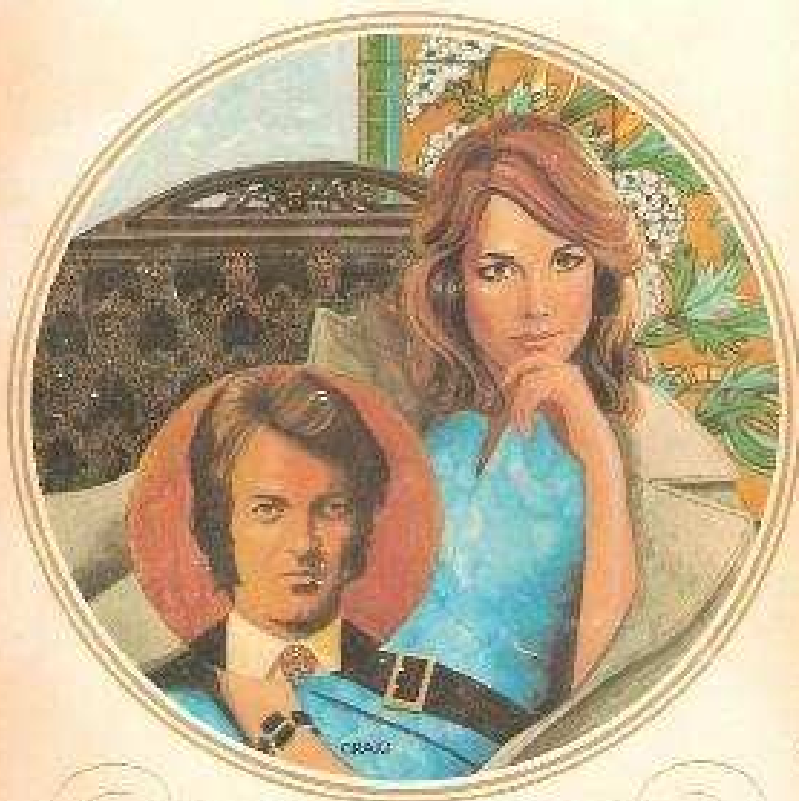
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Harlequin Presents

MARJORIE  
LEWY

the fire in the diamond



# **THE FIRE IN THE DIAMOND**

**Marjorie Lewty**

"I don't think you and I have anything to say to each other, Mr. Lawrence," Toni replied. She didn't want to cross any more swords with him.

There were no doubt plenty of girls who were ready to fall for his charms. She just had to be very careful that she wasn't one of them.

Antonia Warren wanted to be loved, completely and as herself -- but not as an imitation of the wife he had lost.

## CHAPTER ONE

'It's an excellent job.' Miss Black, of the Pioneer Secretarial Agency, looked across the desk at Toni through fashionable heavy-rimmed spectacles. 'Warrens is one of the most important jewellery firms in the country. When you go for interview tomorrow you'll almost certainly find that there are other applicants. And Mr. Lawrence, the director who will be seeing you, isn't an easy man to satisfy. But there's no reason why you shouldn't stand a good chance. You're young, of course, but in my opinion you're capable of holding down a demanding job, otherwise I shouldn't send you. You've had two years experience in temporary positions and I've had good reports of you. It's time you tried for something permanent. You still have your mother to look after?'

Toni stared dazedly at the older woman. She had just had quite a shock, but she didn't intend to mention that to Miss Black. She blinked and said, 'Yes - that is - well, partly. She does machine knitting, you see, and we share the expenses of the flat.'

'H'm,' observed Miss Black, her tone registering her opinion of the size of income likely to accrue from machine knitting. She wrote on a card and pushed it across the desk. 'There you are, Miss Warren.' She smiled - a rare occurrence for Miss Black - and added, 'you have the same name, so perhaps that's a good omen.'

What would Miss Black say, Toni wondered, if she told her that Benjamin Warren, head of Warrens' Jewellers, of Bond Street, happened to be her great-uncle, even if he was unaware of her existence, which he almost certainly was? But she doubted if Miss Black would be impressed. To Miss Black the job was the thing, and you got a job on your merits, not by backdoor methods. With this principle Toni would have agreed. She didn't have her clear, candid grey eyes for nothing.

She got to her feet, a tall girl with beautiful legs, tawny hair and an independent tilt to her chin. 'Thank you very much, Miss Black, I'll be in touch and let you know how I get on.' She picked up the appointment card, put it carefully in her handbag and went down the stairs of the agency and out into Oxford Street.

It was the end of November and promised to be a hard winter. All day it had been bitterly cold, and now it had started to snow. Toni was immediately caught up in the crowds milling along the wide pavements; the Christmas rush seemed to begin earlier every year. She was jostled by a woman in an imitation leopardskin coat, red-faced and festooned with parcels, and sent sliding over the wet pavement, but she hardly noticed. And for once she didn't stop to stare at the tempting displays in the shop windows, trying to work out if this week she could afford to take home some little present for her mother.

*Fantastic* was the word that kept running through her mind. Absolutely *fantastic*! Of all the thousands and thousands of companies in London, that Warrens should be the one that Miss Black had sent her to! And what made it all the more incredible was that only last night Mother had said, 'D'you know, Toni, I've got the oddest feeling that something wonderful is going to happen.'

Toni had grinned and said, 'Now, isn't that nice?' She was quite accustomed to her mother's premonitions. Mrs. Warren was that odd mixture - a practical dreamer. With an artist husband, whose art was an overriding passion which came before everything else, she had had to be practical, but her dream had never entirely disappeared.

'Some day,' she had said to Toni, when she was old enough to understand, 'your father will have the recognition his work deserves. His pictures will be hung in famous galleries all over the world. There'll be a new life for us all - travel - meeting interesting people - not having to - to—'

Toni guessed that what she had been going to say was '—not having to scrimp and make do all the time.' But her mother didn't complain. Her fair, fluffy hair and soft mouth belied a tough and courageous nature. In the small cottage in Devon, where living was as cheap as it could be anywhere, she grew all their own vegetables in the small garden. She made Toni's clothes and a few for herself and even some of her husband's. She knitted for anyone who would pay her to do it. Once, when things were at their grimmest, she had gone to 'help' in the big house in the village, until Toni's father found out and put a stop to it. His conscience pricked, he had found some illustrating work with an advertising agency in the nearby town which brought in a

small but regular income, and after that things had been a little better. But when Toni was eighteen, just finishing her training at secretarial school, her father had caught a chill, painting out by the river one day. It had turned to pneumonia, and even the modern wonder drugs had been powerless to save his life.

When it was all over Toni and her mother had discussed what they should do. 'I can get a job in Exeter - I can go in and out by bus each day,' Toni had suggested. 'There'll be enough to pay the rent and so on. We'll manage. But her mother had shaken her head quite violently. 'No,' she had burst out. 'We're going to get away from here - right away. We're going to London.'

'London?' gasped Toni. 'But—but I thought you loved the cottage, and the country and everything.'

'I loved your father,' Mrs. Warren said simply. 'This place was what he wanted, so I wanted it too. But now I must get away to somewhere quite different. Somewhere where I can see shops and lights and people and things happening. Somewhere where there is- life and - and - oh, do you know what I mean, darling?'

'Yes, I think I do,' Toni said slowly. Not until this moment had she realized the extent of her mother's sacrifice all these years.

'And you agree? You'll come with me?'

Toni laughed suddenly and hugged her mother. 'Of course I'll come. I'll land a fabulous job and we'll have a super flat and we'll go to theatres and concerts and eat out at glamorous restaurants. London, here we come!'

That was two years ago and it hadn't turned out quite like that. But it hadn't been so bad. Typing jobs, though not very interesting, were reasonably well paid; the small flat they had managed to find at last in Hornsey was as cheerful as Mrs. Warren's home-making flair could make it, with bright cushions and curtains adding splashes of colour to the drab carpet and scratched furniture, and - even if the exchequer wouldn't stretch to theatres and concerts - at least it ran to a cinema now and again, with a take-home meal afterwards.

And Mrs. Warren went on dreaming.

Emerging from Turnpike Lane Station, Toni found that the snow was falling more thickly, clinging to her hair and trickling past the upturned collar of her tweed coat to find its way icily down her neck. She put her head down against the wind and started off along Green Lanes. All the way from Oxford Circus, as the familiar stations clanged and swooshed past, she had been trying to make up her mind how much she should tell her mother about this interview tomorrow. She knew quite well what would happen if she mentioned the coincidence that she was going to Warrens - Mother would be immediately airborne with excitement. She would bubble over with marvellous plans wherein Toni would be a sort of Cinderella, transported from a drab office routine to a life of glamour and luxury, which would be provided by a fabulously rich fairy godfather, in the shape of her great-uncle.

No, probably better to be a little vague about the interview until it was over. There was no guarantee that she would get the job, anyway. Miss Black had been careful to point out that there would be other applicants; there was this Managing Director, Mr. Lawrence, who sounded rather a brute. 'Not an easy man to satisfy,' Miss Black had said, and Toni knew from experience what *that* meant. It meant that he was a perfectionist and no doubt a slavedriver as well. But she didn't suppose she would be working for him. He doubtless had his own personal secretary, with years of faithful service behind her. Toni tried to visualize the set-up at Russells, but all she could see was a sort of Aladdin's cave, with priceless necklaces and bracelets encrusted with diamonds and emeralds and rubies, spilling out in a glittering cascade from velvet-lined jewel cases. She grinned to herself. Who was the dreamer now?

Five minutes later Toni turned off the busy main street into a side road. Azalea Road, where she lived, was exactly the same as Primrose Road, on one side of it, and Mimosa Road on the other, and all the other short, straight streets that looked as if they had been drawn with a ruler squarely off the main street. The houses were uniform too, blackened gradually through the years when every one of them had its coal fire smoking in the grate, all with sad little strips of garden fronted by scruffy hedges or low brick walls.

Toni fitted her key into the door of No. 2' and ran up stairs to the first floor. Walking from the station she had come to a decision about telling all the details of her interview tomorrow. If her mother had managed to land herself a good knitting order and had had a good day, then she would keep the news to herself. But if things had gone wrong and the prospects were gloomy, then Toni would deliver her bombshell and tell her mother something to give her a lift. She pushed open the living room door and saw that the bombshell was going to be necessary. Mrs. Warren was sitting, by the gas fire, toasting bread on the end of a carving fork and, with ominous significance, the knitting machine was pushed away into the corner of the room, looking unused and dejected beneath its green plastic cover. Evidently no order!

Mrs. Warren's eyes lit up when Toni came into the room, but there was a slight droop to the shoulders beneath the brown cardigan. Only a temporary droop, Toni was sure, for nothing would defeat her mother for long; somehow she would always manage to bob up again. But it was easy to see that her day had not gone too well.

'Hullo, Mother, here I am - your darling daughter, very wet, tired and hungry.' Toni grinned cheerfully and hugged her mother, who had dropped the toasting fork and jumped to her feet the moment the door opened. 'Oh gosh, I'm making you as wet as I am myself!'

Mrs. Warren pushed back the soft fair hair that was always escaping from its restraining pins; she had never cut her hair because her husband liked it long. 'Oh, never mind that!' She brushed carelessly at her skirt. 'But you're soaking, Toni. Let me take your coat, dear, and shake it. And your shoes! Go along and change and then we'll have tea straight away.'

Toni went into the bedroom, changed into slacks and a loose-fitting top, and towelled her hair dry, beginning to feel a pleasantly warm glow of comfort and contentment as she heard the clink of plates and cutlery from the next room. Even the unceasing flood of pop music from the next flat's radio wasn't too bad because it was familiar, part of the home they had made for themselves here.

Back in the living room she found a trolley drawn up to the glow of the fire, a cushioned chair on either side of it. A squat teapot sat under its yellow



knitted cosy. There was a healthy mound of buttered toast, a jar of fish paste, a pyrex dish full of watercress and a home-made ginger cake.

Toni sank into a chair and picked up the pot of paste. 'Um - anchovy and shrimp - my favourite!' She applied some liberally to her toast and sat back, happily munching. 'What sort of a day, Mother? No luck?' She glanced towards the shrouded knitting machine in the corner.

Mrs. Warren shook her head with a humorous grimace. 'Not an order in sight! I've been all round my regulars, but they've filled up with Christmas stock and they won't want anything more for five or six weeks until the new spring stuff begins to come in. Even Mrs. Fisher turned me down, and I was rather counting on her, I must admit. But what about you, love? Have you seen Miss Black?'

Toni nodded. 'I got off early and went round to the agency.'

'And?'

'And I've got an interview tomorrow for a permanent job.'

'Permanent? Would you like that?'

'I think I might,' Toni said, 'if it was a good place to work in. And this sounds as if it might be interesting.'

'Then that's splendid.' Her mother poured tea and handed her a cup. 'What's the name of the firm, and where is it?'

Toni sipped her tea and put the cup and saucer back on the trolley. Then, with a little smile hovering round her mouth, she said, 'Guess!' and when her mother shook her head, duly mystified, she added, 'This is going to shake you darling. I've got an interview with - wait for it! - with Warrens, of Bond Street.'

'Warrens? You don't mean—'

'I do indeed. *The Warrens*. Our rich relations,' Toni giggled, enjoying the effect of her news. 'How about that, eh?'

For a moment her mother was stunned into silence. She had turned suddenly pale, but now the colour came flooding back into her cheeks and excitement put a sparkle into her brown eyes. Toni had never seen her look so young and eager, and she felt a pang of self-reproach. It would be too bad if she had to disappoint her, after raising her hopes like this.

'Don't count on it too much, though,' she said. 'The job isn't in the bag yet, by any means. Miss Black says there are sure to be other girls applying, and apparently the man I've got the interview with, a Mr. Lawrence, is rather difficult to please.'

But her mother's enthusiasm was now in full swing. 'Of course you'll get it, Toni dear. I know you will - I've had this feeling for days. I told you I knew something good was going to happen, didn't I?' She sighed happily. 'All the years of hoping and wishing, and now - this! The beginning of a new life for us!'

'Mother, *dearest*, you really mustn't get so carried away. What if the whole thing fizzles out?' Toni was half-laughing, trying to bring her mother gently down to the level of reality.

Mrs. Warren shook her head. 'It's no good, my dear, you won't shake my confidence. These other girls - what have they got that you haven't? And it's bound to count for something when you tell them that you're related to the head of the firm.'

Toni's eyebrows lifted and her grey eyes were wide and clear. 'Tell them? But you don't imagine I'm going to *tell* them?'

'Of course you must tell them,' her mother said definitely. 'There's nothing wrong or dishonest about that, and it might make all the difference.'

'But - but, Mother - all that stuff about our rich relations - I always thought it was a joke.'

She was remembering the times at the cottage, when funds were dangerously low and Father hadn't sold a picture for months. Sometimes Mother would say, 'Why don't you approach your Uncle Benjamin in London, Frank? Not to beg, of course you couldn't do that, but just make yourself known to him? He might be interested in your work and offer to hang one of your pictures in his office, or his boardroom, or somewhere, and then people would see it. Rich, influential people. And that might lead to lots of commissions—'

Frank Warren would smile and say with a faint twinkle in the grey eyes that were so like Toni's, 'Yes, my dear, and pigs might fly.'

And then they had all laughed, Mrs. Warren most of all. But now Toni wondered if, after all, it *had* been a joke to her mother.

'Mother, you're not serious, are you?'

Her mother leaned forward in her chair and suddenly her brown eyes were sombre. 'I'm very serious, my darling. I want you to have a better life than I've had.'

Toni was silent. She could feel her mother's eyes fixed anxiously on her. The sound of pop music from the next flat didn't sound friendly and familiar any more; it sounded raucous and jangly. At last she shook her head firmly. 'I couldn't,' she said.

'But—'

'Listen, Mother, it's not that I'm being awkward or proud or anything. I just know that when it came to the point, I couldn't. The words wouldn't come out.'

There was another silence. Then Mrs. Warren smiled wryly. 'You're very like your father, Toni. Well, if that's how you feel we won't say any more about it. But you will go for the interview, won't you? Promise me you'll go.'

Relieved, Toni laughed. 'Oh yes, I'll go for the interview, I promise. And I'll do my darnedest to land the job because it sounds like a good one.'

Mrs. Warren nodded. 'We'll wait and hope for the best, then. Now, let's talk about something else. Did you manage to get the brochures for Scotland?'

For the rest of the evening they discussed a possible coach tour in Scotland. That was dream-stuff too, for it wasn't at all certain whether they would be able to afford it. Toni was glad that her mother seemed to have accepted the situation with regard to her interview tomorrow. In the end it had been easier than she had expected. Her mother was evidently, but somewhat uncharacteristically, willing to wait and see what happened, and there were no more castles built in the air. When they finally got up to clear away and wash the dishes and prepare for the morning, Toni gave her mother a little hug and said, 'Thanks for being so understanding, Mum. I'll do my best tomorrow, I really will.'

So far as she could remember, the only time Toni had been inside a jeweller's shop was when she went to buy herself a watch, when she first came to London and found there were strict time schedules to conform to if you wished to be popular with employers. *That* jeweller's shop had rows of engagement and wedding rings on a glass shelf under the counter, and on the shelves behind a selection of alarm clocks, along with a mixed array of wrist-watches, rolled- gold cuff links and electro-plated cruets.

She had known that Warrens of Bond Street would not be anything like that, but she was hardly prepared for the atmosphere of muted opulence that met her gaze when the heavy glass entrance door was held open for her next morning by an elderly uniformed attendant, and she stepped into something not too much unlike the fantastic Aladdin's cave of her last night's imaginings. Her feet sank into a magnificent patterned carpet, which she guessed must have come from the exotic East. There was no counter to be seen. Instead there were two small tables with delicately carved legs, beside which stood small elbow chairs, upholstered in shrimp pink brocade. Wood panelling covered the walls and a crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. In the corner of the room a great, inlaid grandfather clock ticked away discreetly.

A customer was seated in one of the chairs, an elegant woman with silver-gilt hair, wearing a mutation mink coat, her pale fingers heavy with

rings. A middle-aged salesman in a dark suit sat opposite, spreading out upon the black velvet cloth that covered the table a selection of brooches that would not have been out of place in any Aladdin's cave.

Uncomfortably aware of her very ordinary tweed coat and the fact that neither her gloves nor handbag aspired to originate from any living animal, Toni quickly turned back to the attendant. 'I have an appointment for twelve o'clock. Miss Warren.'

The man, who looked as if he had been here for almost as long as the furniture and fittings, stared rather hard at her. 'Miss - er - Warren, did you say?'

She smiled at him. 'Yes, that's right.' Toni's father used to say that her smile was like the sun coming out, but she had always discounted that remark as artistic licence. However, the smile seemed to have quite an astonishing effect on the elderly doorkeeper.

'Please wait here a moment, miss, and I'll find someone to take you up.'

He returned almost immediately with a thin woman in a tailored suit, wearing gold clip earrings encrusted with tiny pearls. Toni wondered fleetingly if they were real and decided that they would have to be. This place gave you a feeling that everything here must be the genuine article, no imitations accepted. 'Miss Warren?' The woman's voice was low and cultivated, her face an expressionless mask. 'Will you follow me, please?'

She led the way under an arch into a smaller room, similar to the first, at the back of which a wide staircase with carved balustrade rose to a carpeted passage above. On the right a door bore a discreet plate inscribed, 'Mr. G. R. Lawrence.' Toni's guide tapped and a deep voice from inside said 'Come.'

Toni was uncomfortably aware of a nervous churning in the pit of her stomach. In the two years she had spent going from one typing job to another she had encountered many varieties of office, but never one like this, and she was beginning to doubt if she would ever fit in here. There was nothing of the easy-going atmosphere that she appreciated. It was all so formal, and, to her mind, overpowering in its traditional elegance. But she had promised her

mother to do her best to get the job and she must go through with the interview now.

The room she entered was small, almost poky, furnished mainly with a huge mahogany desk behind which a man sat writing. Books, files and papers littered the desk. There was a certain lack of elegance here that Toni found only marginally reassuring.

The woman with the pearl earrings took a sheaf of papers from a side table and put them on the desk. 'This is your final applicant, Mr. Lawrence,' she said in her smooth, faintly deferential voice.

'Yes. Thank you, Mrs. Janes,' he replied absently, without lifting his head. He made a vague gesture in Toni's direction, 'Sit down, will you?' he said, and went on with his writing.

Mrs. Janes glided out and closed the door and Toni sat down and waited. After two years of changing jobs she was fairly well accustomed to the techniques of interviewing. There were the interviewers who were friendly and put you at your ease. There were others who tried to catch you out and make you feel uncomfortable and inadequate. There was also a very small minority who leered, and from whom she got away as quickly as possible. She wondered what sort the man sitting on the other side of the desk would turn out to be. From where she sat she couldn't see much of his face, but he seemed younger than she had expected. Middle thirties, probably. Firm, broad shoulders on which the fine grey worsted of his jacket fitted immaculately. Crisp white linen showed at his neck with a glimpse of a burgundy red silk tie. Gold cuff-links gleamed at his wrists. All highly traditional, as you would have expected here, Toni thought with an inward grin. Only his hair, very dark brown and thick, gave the impression that it might at times resist being tamed and subjugated. It had a hint of wildness and springiness that seemed somehow out of place in this establishment. But on the whole he looked very much the young executive, and probably rather arrogant with it. She didn't think she was going to like him.

The silence lengthened and he went on writing. Toni began to suspect that he was the intimidating kind of interviewer, that he was ignoring her on purpose, trying to make her nervous. In the event, it had precisely the

opposite effect, for suddenly the churning inside her stopped, a glitter came into her clear grey eyes, and her chin lifted a fraction. This job, she decided, was not for her; if this was the scene of her rich relations, well, it wasn't her scene. She was almost tempted to get up then and there and walk out, but at that very moment he raised his head and looked at her:

It was rather extraordinary, for he looked - and went on looking. He had curiously fascinating eyes, greenish with lighter flecks, and they were narrowed as they passed over her face. Toni stared back at him. He wasn't giving anything away by his expression, but if she hadn't known they were absolute strangers to each other she would have imagined she saw recognition in his face. Not the old ploy of 'Where have we met before?' but rather a kind of shock. She evidently had a double somewhere.

With his right hand he groped for the papers that Mrs. Janes had put on the desk and drew them towards him without taking his eyes from her face. Toni was accustomed to being looked at by men, but this was different. She began to feel quite uneasy.

Then he moved his concentrated examination to the papers before him. 'You are Miss - Warren?' The deep voice seemed to hold a query beyond the obvious one and she smiled and said, 'Yes. Coincidence, isn't it?'

His brows lifted a fraction and she saw that she had made a mistake in trying to lighten the atmosphere on this rather odd interview. '*Is it?*' he said coolly, and looked down again at the papers. 'You've been sent to me by Miss Black. You're twenty-one. Previous experience - H'm—' He glanced cursorily down the agency form. Then he pushed it away and sat back in his chair.

'Well, Miss Warren, it looks as if you've been sent here on a fruitless errand. I think Miss Black must have misunderstood my message. I thought I'd made it clear that I need someone older, with much more experience than you have. In our particular kind of business we need a very special type of employee.. So I'm afraid—' He spread his hands in a gesture of polite regret.

Toni felt as if he had slapped her face. She didn't believe a word of what he had said. Miss Black didn't make mistakes like that. No, the man had

evidently taken an instant dislike to her because she reminded him of somebody he didn't want to be reminded of.

She stood up very straight. Well, if he disliked her for no good reason, she disliked him for all sorts of reasons. She disliked his curt, arrogant manner, his almost insulting scrutiny, his imperious way of dismissing her. And as she had nothing now to lose she saw no reason why she shouldn't let him know exactly what she thought.

'May I ask,' she began pleasantly, 'whether the position was that of *your* secretary, Mr. Lawrence?'

'Yes,' he said. 'It was.'

'Then,' she went on in the same tone, 'you needn't feel any regret. If I had been offered the job I certainly wouldn't have accepted it.'

'You wouldn't?' He sounded calm, but there was a gleam in those strangely-flecked eyes that denoted danger. But she went on recklessly, 'No, I wouldn't. I don't like the atmosphere here at all and I wouldn't consider working here.' She warmed to her subject. 'It's all very elegant and traditional, no doubt, but I prefer somewhere more human, less - less geared to the rich and privileged minority.' She didn't realize that she was quoting her father almost word for word. He had been a passionate supporter of the ordinary people.

Mr. Lawrence stood up too, which brought him a good six inches above her, and she was by no means a small girl. 'Very interesting,' he said coldly, 'but I'm really not concerned with your political bias. I suggest you look for a position more to your taste - and don't waste my time any longer,' he concluded nastily.

She smiled in triumph that she had managed to get under that hard assurance of his, if only for a moment. 'Good morning, Mr. Lawrence,' she said sweetly, and walked out of the office, her tawny head held high.



Down the softly carpeted stairway, through the two exquisite showrooms. 'Good morning, miss.' The uniformed attendant held the heavy plate-glass door open and she passed through, nodding graciously.

Then she was out in Bond Street, a chilly wind blowing sneakily round her ankles. She was shaking faintly inside and she paused for a moment beside Warrens' window to pull herself together. Well, that seemed to be that, and she didn't know *what* she was going to tell her mother. She stared through the window where two fabulous pieces lay cradled in folds of velvet — an enormous opal brooch, encrusted with diamonds and set in gold, with a ring to match. As she looked the colours swam and glinted in the brilliantly lit display. She fumbled for her handkerchief, blew her nose hard, and turned away towards Piccadilly and the homeward journey.

She had walked perhaps fifty yards when she realized that someone was calling her name repeatedly, and stopped to find the elderly doorkeeper just behind her. 'Miss Warren,' he panted, his sparse grey hair blowing in the wind. 'Miss Warren, please. Mr. Lawrence says would you kindly come back. He would like to speak to you again.'

Toni hesitated, while on either side the moving mass of pedestrians parted round her, as if she were an object left on the pavement by mistake, an object that nobody cared to claim. That was rather how she felt at the moment. She looked round for some way of escape, but the doorkeeper bore the name *Warrens* on his collar in ornate gold letters, and she decided that if she made a dash for it somebody might conclude that she was making off with the loot. As it was, one or two of the passers-by were giving her curious looks.

So, reluctantly, she turned and walked back to the shop. She had thought that she had said good-bye to that detestable Mr. Lawrence for good. What, she wondered, could he possibly want with her?

## CHAPTER TWO

THIS time Toni was not taken to the upstairs office, but to a room leading off the back showroom. The Lawrence man was there, though; she was immediately aware of him, standing tall and nonchalant beside the marble fireplace, in which burned a real fire - a modern, slow-burning, safety type of fire, certainly, but she felt that that was merely a small concession to twentieth-century fire regulations. The rest of the room might have come straight out of Dickens - solidly furnished in the manner of a bygone age.

In a high-backed chair near the fire sat an elderly man who must surely be Benjamin Warren, the fabulous head of the family upon whom all her mother's extravagant hopes were set. At first glance Toni had to admit that he really did look rather fabulous, with his white hair and his purple silk cravat, held by a gold pin. He had a neatly-trimmed white beard, and a monocle hung around his neck. But it was his eyes that held her attention; they were clear grey and very shrewd, but they were kind eyes. They were exactly like her father's eyes, and at this moment they were looking at her with a strange expression. Then he said in a gentle, courteous voice, 'You are Miss Warren? Come and sit down. Gray, give Miss Warren a chair.'

The tall man moved from the mantelpiece and drew out a chair for her. She murmured acknowledgment and their looks crossed briefly, like two sharp rapiers engaging each other. She saw his mouth twist cynically as he returned to his position beside the fireplace.

'Now then, Miss Warren—' the old man picked up a letter from the table beside him '—perhaps you would care to explain this to me.'

Toni took the sheet of notepaper he held out, a horrid suspicion suddenly forming in her mind. Then she looked down at it, and the suspicion became a certainty. In her mother's large, flowing handwriting she read:

*'Dear Mr. Warren,*

*You will not know me, but I am the widow of Frank Warren, who was the son of your brother, who died in Italy, many years ago. I thought you might care to know that my daughter Antonia, who is, of course,*

*your great-niece, is having an interview with your managing director today, and as she may be too nervous to mention the relationship I am writing to you personally. She is your own blood relation, and I believe that family quarrels should be allowed to die after all this time. I hope you will agree with me. I remain, Yours sincerely, Margaret Warren.'*

Toni put the letter down and said in a low voice, 'I'm very sorry about this. It was quite wrong of my mother to write to you without telling me anything about it. It makes me feel very - embarrassed.'

The old man was looking keenly at her. Then he raised his eyes to the man standing by the fireplace. 'Put me in the picture, Gray. I'm at a loss about all this. Miss Warren came to apply for the secretarial position, is that so?'

'That is correct, sir.'

'And you were interviewing her when I opened the letter and sent the message through to you that I wished to see her?'

Gray Lawrence moved from the fireplace and stood behind a chair opposite to Benjamin Warren, his hands on its back. 'Not quite. Miss Warren and I had mutually agreed that she had been sent here by a misunderstanding on the part of the agency, and she had just left.'

Startled by this barefaced misrepresentation of what happened, Toni looked up to find Gray Lawrence regarding her with that cynical expression in his strangely-flecked eyes, as if he were daring her to dispute what he had just said. Indignation took the place of embarrassment and she turned back to Mr. Warren and said firmly, 'Mr. Lawrence is mistaken. There was no misunderstanding. He told me straight away in no uncertain manner that I'd wasted my time coming here, and that I was not at all what he required in a secretary.' Her tawny head was held high, her eyes sparkling clear - and very angry.

The old man gave a dry chuckle. 'Spoken like a true Warren!' Then his face composed itself. 'You must forgive the levity, my dear. I must admit that I

feel slightly - I think inebriated wouldn't be too strong a word, to discover that after all I'm not the last of the Warren clan, as I'd supposed.'

Toni leaned towards him. \*Then you do believe it's true? I thought you might think I was an - an impostor.'

'Why should I not believe it?' The old man's voice was gentle. 'For one thing, the family likeness is - quite extraordinary. You saw it, of course, Gray?'

Toni saw the look that passed between the two men, full of significance which she couldn't understand. 'Oh yes, I saw it,' replied Gray Lawrence tightly. He turned and walked back to the mantelpiece and again Toni wondered who it was that she resembled sufficiently to cause such an attitude on the part of this man towards a stranger.

The embarrassment returned, more strongly than ever. *Why* did her mother have to write this wretched letter? she thought, looking down at it as it lay accusingly on the table beside her. Surely no good could come of trying to revive - or make use of - a long-dead relationship. Over fifty years since the quarrel that took her grandfather away from his family! Far too long a gap to be bridged, especially when the world of Benjamin Warren was so remote from that of herself and her mother.

Impulsively she got to her feet. She smiled at the old man, who had received her courteously at least - very different from the deflating treatment she had had from the man standing behind her. 'Thank you for believing me,' she said, 'and once again I'm sorry that my mother should have thought fit to write to you. You've been very kind, but I'm sure you're not interested in a very distant relative like me. So now, if you'll excuse me, I'll say good-bye, and thank you again.'

Benjamin Warren shook his head. 'Tactfully expressed, my dear, but totally inaccurate. In point of fact I'm extremely interested in you, and the relationship is not really distant at all. Do you imagine that I don't want to hear about my brother - your grandfather - who one day long ago walked out of the family house, nearly breaking my mother's heart, because he refused to obey my father's wish that he should take his place in the family business? Do you imagine that I didn't grieve when we had news that he was missing in

the first war - that after my father died I didn't try in every possible way to discover whether he was alive, and that eventually my mother and I had to assume that he had been killed? Can you still imagine that I'm not interested in you - Antonia?'

'I - I'm sorry, I didn't think of it like that.' Toni was suddenly moved by the old man's sad, gentle expression. 'It was selfish of me.' She sat down again on the edge of the chair. 'Please ask me what you would like to know and I'll tell you anything I can. But I never knew my grandfather. He died before I was born.'

Benjamin Warren nodded and said, 'Yes, yes, of course, but there must be other things - all sorts of little things—' The gentle voice trailed off and he looked up at the brass carriage clock on the mantelpiece, and then at the man standing beside it. 'I have a call coming through from Bouleston in Paris in a few minutes, Gray. After that I shall be free for an hour or so.' He turned back to Toni. 'You can spare me a little time? Or have you a job you must get back to?'

'I'm free until half-past one,' she said. 'I have a part-time job at present - afternoons only.'

'Splendid. Then you must allow me to buy you a modest lunch. We have an excellent little place near here, where the service is good, and where we can be quiet and talk. Gray, take Antonia along to Carli's and look after her until I arrive, will you, my boy?'

'Certainly,' said Gray Lawrence. 'Shall we go, Miss Warren?' He detached himself from the mantelpiece and sauntered across the room, his face expressionless.

Toni stood up again, looking from him to the old man in the chair. Benjamin Warren was smiling encouragingly, almost as if he could guess her feelings. 'Go along with him, my dear. And Gray,' he added mildly, 'don't you think you might call her Antonia?'

A quick look which Toni could not interpret passed between the two men, and then she found herself outside in the show-room, walking beside Gray

Lawrence and feeling a sense of unreality greater than she had ever known. If only he would say something - anything that would put her at her ease! But he walked through the place as if he owned it, and perhaps, in a way, he did. Certainly Benjamin Warren seemed to consult him and rely on him all along the line, which would no doubt add to his natural arrogance. Hateful man, she thought, with a brief sideways glance that showed her the lapels of his impeccably tailored suit. That made her all the more conscious that her own coat was in its third winter, that it had originally come off the rail of a multiple store, and that her shoes, gloves and handbag were of even more humble origin.

What she was *not* conscious of was that she walked with natural grace, holding her small tawny head beautifully on her slender neck. She was not aware, either, that the languid lady in the mink coat, still engaged in selecting from the jewels spread before her, would have given her entire bank balance for Toni's long slim legs, her clear skin, faintly flushed with pink, and her eyes, sparkling like washed crystal.

Gray Lawrence paused at the door. 'Oh, Bates,' he addressed the elderly doorkeeper, 'will you tell Mrs. Janes that I shall be away for a short time. If anything urgent comes along she can contact me at Carli's.'

'Very good, sir.' Bates touched his cap, held open the heavy plate-glass door, and they were out in Bond Street.

'This way,' said Gray Lawrence, and he put a hand to Toni's elbow, to guide her to the right, through the crowds of pedestrians and window-gazers. The small gesture was part of his courtesy code, no doubt, but she was acutely aware of the pressure of his fingers on her arm and wished he would take them away. When he didn't she began to feel more and more uncomfortable and eventually stepped ahead of him as a fat lady advanced towards them. In doing so she managed to disengage herself from his grip, but at the same time she somehow met the fat lady head on. This resulted in one of those absurd side-stepping, apologetic episodes, which made Toni squirm inside with the ever-growing feeling of inadequacy.

Her arm was gripped again, even more firmly this time, and his voice said irritably, 'What the blazes are you trying to do? Have us both sprawling on the ground?'

The picture this presented made her lips twitch, which restored a little of her self-confidence. But this time she allowed him to guide her into a narrow passageway and up some stairs into a small, comfortable lounge, where he was greeted by a steward in a white coat.

'Morning, Giovanni. Mr. Warren will be along in a few minutes, meanwhile may we have drinks?' He turned to Toni. 'What do you fancy?'

Drinks before lunch in surroundings of such intimate affluence was right outside her experience, but she could hardly admit to Gray Lawrence, with the waiter standing there, that she had never had anything more exciting to drink than sherry, and that only at Christmas.

'Lemonade, please,' she said.

His brows went up slightly. 'Oh, come, you can do better than that. Use your imagination, my dear.'

He was making her look a fool in front of the waiter. 'Lemonade,' she repeated firmly, and sent a smile in the direction of the white-coated man.

'Certainly, madam.' He bowed, looking slightly dazzled. And your usual, sir?' He led them to a small table with deeply-cushioned seats beside it and departed.

'You play the part very well,' said Gray Lawrence. 'Shall I take your coat? You'll find it very warm in the restaurant.'

She was tempted to refuse, just to be contrary, but it certainly was very warm and she thought better of it and unbuttoned her tweed coat. He took it from her shoulders in an easy gesture that told her that he was well accustomed to escorting women. Mink-coat and diamonds women, though, she thought with an inward grin, not *her* sort!

She lowered herself into the soft embrace of the velvet lounge seat, hoping that he would take the chair opposite, but instead he sat beside her, stretching his long legs in front of him.

'Yes,' he mused, 'you certainly play the part well.'

Toni straightened her pleated skirt over her knees and wished she had worn her one reasonably glamorous dress. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said stiffly.

'The part of the wide-eyed little innocent,' he drawled, nodding thanks to Giovanni as the drinks were placed on the table. 'Oh, I'm not blaming you - don't think that. I'm full of admiration for the way you've planned it all. How long did you have to wait for a job with Warrens to come into the market? And did you get the formidable Miss Black at the agency on your side? I bet she was tickled to think she was playing a part in a dramatic reconciliation act with Benjamin Warren in one of the leading roles. And the letter from your mother - arriving at precisely the right moment - delivered by hand, I assume. That was a nice touch. There was nearly a fatal slip-up, though. I suppose you didn't calculate on your interview with me being *quite* so short. That would explain your pretty little outburst of petulance upon leaving, wouldn't it?'

Toni was staring at him incredulously as he lounged beside her, a faint smile hovering round his mouth. When she could find her voice she said, 'You mean - you actually believe that I'd planned all this, just - to get on the right side of Mr. Warren?'

'Shouldn't you say Uncle Benjamin?' he jibed, leaning forward to pick up his glass.

Her eyes sparkled frostily. 'All right then, Uncle Benjamin. He *is* my uncle after all. Well, my great-uncle.'

'Oh, granted!' The greenish eyes regarded her narrowly. 'But I suppose you weren't altogether sure what sort of a welcome you would get, were you? Doing it your way, applying for a job in the firm, you didn't *appear* to be asking for anything. Oh yes, very bright indeed!'



She turned and looked straight into the dark, mocking face. 'You're wrong,' she said. 'I don't think I *am* very bright. I don't think I realized that any man could be so - so disgustingly suspicious and cynical as you seem to be, Mr. Lawrence. There was *no* plot, and I *didn't* know that my mother had written that letter. When I left you I had every intention of walking away from Warrens and never coming near the place again. And I wish to goodness now that I had,' she added rather bitterly.

'Oh, surely not?' he put in softly. 'Think of the pleasure you would have denied old Benjamin. He's absolutely delighted to have discovered an unknown relative. He's a great one for the family angle.' He looked down into his glass 'The one thing that does rather baffle me, I admit,' he went on musingly, 'is the timing. Why choose to leave it until now? Why not last year? Or the year before? Still, I suppose you had your reasons, which you will doubtless keep to yourself.'

Suddenly Toni's anger got the better of everything else - her self-consciousness, even her feelings of awkwardness and inadequacy in these expensively unfamiliar surroundings. 'Look, Mr. Lawrence,' she burst out in a low, furious voice. 'You've made it quite plain from the first moment you set eyes on me that you disliked me intensely. You've made a point of being as offensive as possible to me, for no reason that I can understand. Now, as my company is so - so abhorrent to you, perhaps you'll leave me to wait here for my uncle alone.'

To her utter chagrin he burst out laughing and lifted his glass towards her. 'Bravo! I like a girl with spirit. But you've got the wrong impression, you know. I didn't dislike you at all. In fact—' the greenish, flecked eyes wandered over her as she sat beside him, and there was undisguised speculation in them '—I should say that, in different circumstances, I could quite easily like you very much indeed.'

For a moment she returned his audacious stare and then, feeling the heat run into her cheeks, she looked away quickly. Impossible as this *maij* was there was no denying the almost overpowering impact of his masculinity. With those oddly flecked green eyes of his he was like some great beast of the forest, she thought rather extravagantly, lithe and dangerous and utterly sure of himself and contemptuous of anyone who dared to challenge him.

He must have seen her sudden confusion, for his mouth twitched as he said, 'As we're probably fated to see quite a lot of each other, I won't hold out on you. I admit that my first intention, when I saw you, was to get rid of you as quickly as possible.'

'—and as rudely as possible,' she added. 'And since we are being so brutally frank, may I know why?'

'Was I rude?' Again that faint, mocking smile. 'How very remiss of me! You must put it down to the shock. You see, you happen to be amazingly and disturbingly like my wife. Having you around the place was something I couldn't face. The extraordinary fact that your name was Warren was enough to throw me back on my heels too. To make things clearer I should mention that my wife was a Warren - old Benjamin's granddaughter.'

Toni stared at him. 'Was?' she faltered.

'Midge was killed in a car accident just over a year ago,' he said.

'Oh.' The word escaped on a breath. 'Oh, I'm sorry.'

His mouth twisted. 'You shouldn't be sorry, you never knew her. And you'll find the circumstances very much to your advantage, I'm sure, so far as Benjamin is concerned. He's an excellent businessman, but he's also a born romantic. Strange how the two often go together. He'll probably see you as a gift from above to take Midge's place. He adored her.' He tossed off his drink abruptly, glanced over her head and then got to his feet. Here he is now. You'll be relieved to get rid of me, no doubt. Carry on with the good work,' he added with unmistakable irony, and with a formal inclination of his dark head he turned to leave the restaurant, pausing to speak to Benjamin on his way out.

Toni watched the two men as they stood together and she had to admit that they made a distinguished pair, the older man exquisite, almost in the manner of a past age, with his cravat and his monocle; and Gray Lawrence, very much of the present age - or at least one social section of it - with his casual way of wearing his well-cut clothes, his crisp white linen and fastidiously correct hair style. He said something to the older man and they

both looked in her direction, and Benjamin smiled and raised a hand courteously. Then the waiter approached and Gray took his leave.

After a few moments' consultation with Giovanni, Benjamin strolled across the lounge to where Toni was sitting. 'I hope Gray has been looking after you, my dear,' he said. 'My telephone call took a little longer than I had expected, and I mustn't make you late for your time schedule. Are you ready for us, Giovanni? Ah, good!'

Toni was led into the small restaurant next to the lounge, where everything spoke of comfort and excellence and - to Toni, who had her own ideas on such matters - of somewhat unnecessary extravagance.

Benjamin beamed at her from the opposite side of the small table, where glass and cutlery sparkled and a tiny white vase shaped like an urn held three perfect hothouse rosebuds. 'Well now, this is most delightful. It is always a pleasure to give lunch to a pretty young woman, but when that pretty young woman turns out to be one's own long-lost brother's granddaughter the whole thing takes on the enchantment of a fairy tale. I have taken the liberty of ordering for us both, Antonia. For myself I prefer civilized food to some of Carli's wilder flights of fancy. I hope you like duckling, with melon before and one of Carli's fluffy concoctions afterwards?'

'Sounds delicious,' murmured Toni. And of course it was. It was the most delicious meal that had ever come her way. It was a pity that her state of mind was such that she hardly noticed what she was eating. Benjamin insisted upon her drinking some of the delicate rose-coloured wine he had ordered, in spite of her protests that she had to work this afternoon, and she wasn't used to taking wine with lunch. And that, she thought, was the understatement of all time, as her lunch usually consisted of a hunk of cheese and an apple, which she ate in any convenient spot, depending on where the current job happened to be. Her mother packed it for her in a neat bag, insisting that it was much healthier than the snatched coffee and bun she might otherwise be tempted to settle for.

'Just one small glass with the duckling,' Benjamin urged. 'You're looking a little tired, my dear. It will do you good.' There was a touch of almost paternal concern in his voice and Toni found herself drawn to him, now that

they were alone together, with that cynical, insolent Gray Lawrence out of the way.

People began to drift into the dining room, mostly men, whose clothes and manner breathed affluence. One or two of them were accompanied by equally elegant women, and several of them greeted Benjamin with the kind of respect accorded to an elder statesman, Toni noticed with something like amusement. Her great-uncle was evidently quite a figure in the West End of London.

Benjamin returned their greetings with courtesy, but all his attention was centred on Toni herself. He was the perfect host, unobtrusively putting her at her ease until, with the coming of coffee, she began to feel quite relaxed and at peace with the world, and when Benjamin said, 'And now, Antonia, tell me a little about your family,' she found it easy to talk.

She told him everything she could think of that might interest him. 'I know that my grandfather - that was your brother, of course, married a Polish woman, after the first wrld war, and she died when Daddy was born. He used to talk sometimes about how his father brought him up to be an artist like himself; how they wandered together in Europe, seeing all the wonderful pictures and sculpture and buildings. They never had any proper home and I don't think my father had any real education - not a school education. He used to say he couldn't add two and two together, but he could talk about literature and philosophy and music. And art, of course. I suppose he just picked it up by being with his father all the time. Daddy used to say that his father never seemed to care whether he had any money or not. So long as they could earn enough to keep themselves in food that was all that mattered. In fact, Daddy said he thought his father almost despised money. Which sounds rather fantastic, I must admit.'

'Not to me,' murmured Benjamin Warren. 'Go on.'

'I don't really know much more,' she said. 'Of course, all this was long before I was born and I only know what I can remember Daddy saying.'

'Do you know how your grandfather died?' the old man asked, very low.

'No, not really. But I know Daddy was with him and nursed him. I think it was in Rome. Then, afterwards, Daddy came to Paris to paint, and he met my mother and married her. Just before the war Daddy was ill and he had to live an open-air life and they came back to England, to a little cottage in Devon, where I was born, quite a long time afterwards.' She smiled. 'I think I was rather a surprise.'

'And your parents are still there?'

'Oh no.' Toni looked sad. 'Daddy died just over two years ago and then my mother and I came to London. She'd always wanted to live in London and we thought it would be easier for me to get a job here. I think that's all, is that what you wanted to know?'

Benjamin took out a folded white handkerchief and polished his monocle very slowly. Then he replaced the handkerchief and said, 'Thank you, Antonia.' The gentle, cultivated voice was not quite steady. 'I couldn't make you understand how much this meeting means to me. It's like being given a new glimpse of my youth, in some strange way. My brother and I were very close when we were boys. It was a terrible blow to me when he opposed my father, refusing to come into the family business, and eventually ran away to be an artist. But there was nothing I could do about it; I was scarcely grown up myself then, and my father was something of a family tyrant, I'm sad to say/ He smiled and shook his head with compassion for the folly of family tyrants, and the well-trimmed white beard brushed against the purple silk of his cravat.

For a little while he was silent and Toni watched him, saying nothing, knowing that for the moment he was back in the distant past and had forgotten she was there. Then his inbred courtesy took over and he raised his head. 'Forgive me, my dear, I'm a self-centred old man. Now, tell me about yourself.'

'I'm not very interesting. Twenty-one - nearly. Trained as secretary. Lives with mother in flat in Hornsey. Temporary jobs in and around London for the last two years.' She grinned. 'That's about it.'

His eyes twinkled. 'A *very* brief description - much too brief! How about young men? There must be some young men hovering. You're much too pretty to be left alone by the young men.'

'What a nice compliment!' A dimple showed beside her mouth. 'But no young men in particular. There *was* a boy in Devon; we grew up together, went to school together, and somehow it was taken for granted that some day - Then his parents emigrated to Australia and he went with them, and it just faded out. And since I came to London—' She shrugged. 'No one in particular,' she repeated. It was hardly worth mentioning the men she had worked with in her temporary jobs who had been eager to take her out. Most of them were married, and none of them appealed to her anyway. She smiled across the table at Benjamin. 'I think I must be waiting for Prince Charming.'

It was rather extraordinary that just at that moment she should look up and see Gray Lawrence coming across the floor towards them, a frown settled between his dark brows. Nothing less like Prince Charming could possibly be imagined!

As he reached their table Benjamin looked up at him and then back at Toni, and he had a mischievous, quizzical expression in his shrewd grey eyes. Before Gray Lawrence could speak Benjamin said, under his breath, 'What a delightful idea! I've always fancied being a fairy godfather.' He looked up. 'Something brewing, Gray?'

'Bouleston's just been on the phone again, sir. He seems bothered still about the matter of the lease. He says he needs a firm decision by tomorrow. I thought you should know straight away, in case there were any new figures you wanted me to get out for you.'

Benjamin sighed. 'Business, always business! Can't I take a pretty girl out to lunch without it intruding?'

Toni glanced at her watch. 'I'm afraid I must go now, in any case, Mr. Warren, or I'll be late for my job.'

'Must you, my dear? Gray will put you in a taxi, won't you, Gray? Go down and find one, there's a good fellow, and Antonia will follow.'

Gray gave her what she could only describe as a very nasty look, over the top of Benjamin's head, and strode out of the dining room.

Toni was on her feet, and now Benjamin stood too. He took both her hands in his. 'My dear child, you cannot imagine what a delightful surprise this has been. I shall look forward to entertaining you at my home very soon, away from this "business" atmosphere.'

She drew back a fraction. She hadn't been prepared for this; she had imagined, if she had thought about it at all, that once Benjamin knew all that she could tell him about his brother, long since dead, he would have no further interest in her. Of course, the impossible Mr. Lawrence had suggested that she had come for the sole reason of trying to sponge on her rich relative, but that was just because he had a horrible suspicious nature, and she need give it no further consideration as she wasn't likely to see him again, after today. But even if it didn't mean encountering Gray Lawrence, she wasn't at all sure if she wanted to take the newfound relationship with Mr. Warren any further. This world of wealth and privilege was not her world, and she did not want it to be.

'It's so good of you to ask me,' she said, 'and I feel mean and ungrateful to have to say no. But, you see, I - we, my mother and I, live very quietly. I'm not used to all this— she looked around the small luxurious restaurant '—this way of living. I've so enjoyed meeting you, and having lunch here, and - and everything. It's been like a fairy tale, but—'

He was smiling his gentle, understanding smile, '—but you would be a reluctant Cinderella, is that it?'

She nodded. 'You don't mind? I haven't been rude and horrid and hurt your feelings? You've been so kind and I'd hate to—'

He put a hand on her arm. 'I'm much too old and, I hope, too sensible to take offence, and certainly not with you, Antonia. Now, run along and get your taxi, and thank you once again for brightening a very dull day.'

'Thank *you*, Mr. Warren,' she said, 'and I hope - I hope— suddenly she remembered the girl who had been killed, the granddaughter that Gray

Lawrence said Benjamin had adored. 'I hope you'll be happy,' she finished inadequately. And, on a sudden impulse, she leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

'Goodbye,' she whispered, and walked out of the dining room and down the stairs.

Gray Lawrence was standing outside the shop, a taxi panting in the road beside him. He opened the cab door. 'Au revoir, Miss Warren, I've no doubt we shall be meeting again very soon.'

She lifted her chin. 'Set your mind at rest, there's no risk of that. I've quite definitely refused my uncle's kind invitation to visit him, so this will be our one and only meeting - fortunately.' She climbed into the taxi. 'Good-bye, Mr. Lawrence.'

The driver looked round. 'Where to, miss?' She gave him the address of an insurance office in the City. The flag was down, the taxi swerved across the road, and she was driven away from Gray Lawrence without a backward glance. She was a little sad that she wouldn't see her great-uncle Benjamin again, for he had been sweet to her, but she felt nothing but relief that she wouldn't be extending her brief and deflating relationship with the hateful Mr. Lawrence.

So that it was rather odd that, as the taxi wove its way towards the City, it wasn't Benjamin's kindly and courteous face that remained in her mind. It was the dark, sardonic, utterly detestable face of Gray Lawrence.

On her way home that evening Toni stopped at the local shop and bought some flowers as a peace-offering to her mother. No job. No follow-up to the interview. Her mother was going to be bitterly disappointed at this end to all her dreaming. She had pinned her hopes to this meeting, but it had changed nothing, really. All would be as it had been before.

But as soon as she opened the door of the flat Toni knew that things were different. On the sideboard, the usually empty flower bowl held a mass of



shell-pink carnations nestling in delicate maidenhair fern. The spicy perfume of cloves filled the air, mingling with a faint hint of cigar smoke. On the low table by the fire she saw the remains of tea for two.

Mrs. Warren came out of the kitchen, pink-cheeked. Toni went over and gave her hug and held out her little bunch of anemones. 'I've brought you these, Mum, but it looks as if they're slightly superfluous.'

Thank you, my dear, how lovely! And how thoughtful of you! I'll go and put them in water—'

Toni followed her into the kitchen. 'Who have you been entertaining, Mum? I think I can guess.'

Mrs. Warren smiled happily. 'Yes, I'm sure you can, dear. Mr. Benjamin Warren himself. He came in a chauffeur- driven limousine. I'm sure Mrs. Piatt below must have thought the worst! I bet she was peeping behind her curtains. Fortunately I'd just been baking some of your favourite scones. Benjamin seemed to enjoy them - he asked me to call him Benjamin,' she added. There, aren't those lovely?' She carried the vase of anemones into the sitting room and put them on the mantelpiece, standing back to admire the effect.

Toni sank down into a chair. The happenings of the day were beginning to prove rather too much for her. 'He didn't say he intended to come to see you,' she said weakly.

'No, I think it was an impulse. He told me all about you having lunch together. He's very taken with you, Toni. He kept telling me what a lovely girl you are and how glad he was that you'd made yourself known to him.'

Toni said slowly. 'I didn't exactly do that, Mum. *You* did. I wish you hadn't written that letter and delivered it, without telling me. It put me in an awfully false position.'

But the reproach passed unnoticed. Mrs. Warren was transported into the seventh heaven of happiness. 'He's not a bit like I imagined,' she went on. 'I thought he would be a tough, hardbitten man of business, but he's not like

that at all, is he? He's charming, and beautifully mannered. A true gentleman, in the old-fashioned way.' She sighed happily. 'We had such a lot to talk about - he was so interested in your father's work, and he wanted to know all about our life in the cottage and everything. When I told him that the vicar had kindly offered to store the pictures in his attic Mr.

Warren said he would like to drive down to Devon some time and see them. Isn't that nice?'

'Very nice,' murmured Toni.

'And he told me all about his family, too. It seems he's quite alone in the world now. Isn't it strange that you should be the image of his granddaughter? Apparently he brought her up from a baby when both her parents died - they were trapped by an avalanche when they were skiing in Austria. And then his granddaughter herself was killed in a car crash a year or two ago. What a tragedy!' The soft brown eyes were misty. 'You know, Toni, I think he feels that in a strange way you've been sent to him to - to sort of take her place.'

'Look, Mother,' Toni burst out rather desperately, 'I can't let you go on. I know you're thrilled and I hate to have to disappoint you, but I'm afraid all this isn't going to work out the way you hope. I liked Mr. Warren and he's very kind, but truly I don't want to have a wand waved over me and be turned into somebody else. I don't want to change anything. I'm happy here with you, and you've made a cosy home for us, and I'll be earning more money soon and perhaps we can afford a little house eventually. Father always said that the things that were worth having were the things you worked for and earned yourself. That's why he would never approach Benjamin Warren to ask him for favours, when you asked him to. He wanted to make his own way, on his own terms, and not be propped up by rich relations. And - and that's how I feel about it too.'

There was a long silence. Mrs. Warren stared unbelievably at Toni, her soft mouth drooping. 'But - but surely you won't just go on as if nothing had happened?'

Toni looked at her mother's stricken face and thought, In some ways she's like a child, a child who builds bright castles in the air. And she suffers all the anguish of a child when the castles fall down.

She nodded ruefully. 'I'm afraid that's it. That's what Daddy would have wanted me to do, and that's what I want to do. If it had just been a matter of taking a job in the firm, then I'd have, taken it, as I promised you. But that's out of the question, the man I interviewed for the job turned me down flat.' She felt a small spurt of anger as she remembered just how he had turned her down, the arrogant way he had dismissed her. The fact that she resembled his wife went some way towards explaining his attitude, but it certainly didn't excuse it.

'So you see, Mum,' she went on, 'if I can't earn my keep by working in the firm, I couldn't just allow myself to be patronized, because that's how it would be, wouldn't it?

Please understand,' she pleaded.

Mrs. Warren nodded slowly. 'I do understand how you feel, Toni. I didn't live with your father all those years without learning what independence was like.' She turned away and began to stack the plates together, brushing the crumbs with a nervous finger. 'Only you see, darling—' she added, not looking up '—Mr. Warren invited us both to spend Christmas with him, at his home in Gloucestershire, and I accepted. What are we going to say to him?'

## CHAPTER THREE

IN the weeks that remained before Christmas Toni kept reminding herself that it was worth giving in about accepting Benjamin's invitation, just to see her mother so radiantly happy. Mrs. Warren was living in a dream, and at the same time making practical plans for the visit.

'You'll need some new clothes, Toni dear. I thought trousers to wear with your white sweaters, and a day dress, and something special for evenings. I wish there was time for me to make them for you, but I'm afraid there just isn't. We'll have a day in town on Saturday and we'll use the money we were saving for the holiday in Scotland.'

Toni demurred, arguing that she had a perfectly good dress that her mother had made for her to wear at the office party last year, but Mrs. Warren was not to be put off. So the following Saturday they spent shopping, and arrived home laden with parcels and boxes. While Toni made tea her mother unpacked everything and spread the new clothes out on the bed with little exclamations of delight and satisfaction. There was a pair of chocolate-brown trousers, a day dress in cinnamon with a picture collar and a pleated skirt and a wide belt that made Toni's slim waist look even slimmer. For evening they had chosen a terylene georgette in a midnight blue and white print, which swirled out from the hips and ended in a softly gathered flounce.

Toni came in and stood looking somewhat dazedly at all the finery spread out. 'They're absolutely super, but what on earth shall I do with them after Christmas? I can't wear a dress like that for the movies or a meal at Lu Fong's.' She giggled at the idea. 'And what about our Scottish holiday?'

'Never mind that, dear. Live for today, that's my motto.' Mrs. Warren smiled her mysterious smile, adding, 'you never know what may happen next year.'

'Look, Mum,' Toni began warningly, 'if you imagine I'm going to let myself be—' But her mother put a hand across her lips. 'Ssh, darling, let's just take things as they come, shall we?'

In the days that followed that was about all Toni could do. There was a virus going round at the office, which depleted the staff and resulted in her working mornings as well as afternoons, and doing some overtime as well. To make things worse the weather was appalling. The early snow had not fulfilled its promise of a white Christmas. Within a couple of days the temperature had risen and the rain had begun to fall. It fell almost ceaselessly right up to Christmas, breaking all sorts of meteorological records and turning London into a wilderness of cascading wetness that soaked your shoes and splashed your nylons and trickled down your neck. The darkness and the rain affected the spirits of everyone and, as it continued day after day, hardly anyone tried to stay pleasant, and the buses and tubes were packed with irritable, steaming humanity.

Toni worked like a beaver for the whole of Christmas Eve, so that the permanent staff, when they returned after Christmas, shouldn't find a great backlog of typing waiting for them. She left late, hoping to have missed the worst of the rush hour, but the crowds seemed as big as ever and the journey even more tedious and uncomfortable. By the time she finally got back to the flat she was wishing fervently that she and her mother were going to have a quiet, cosy Christmas together, just the two of them. She groaned at the prospect of travelling to some unknown destination in the country, to spend Christmas at a strange house among strangers. She even had a wild idea of trying to get out of it at the last moment, of finding some excuse. Perhaps, she thought hopefully, she was going to start with 'flu. Certainly she was shivering as she opened the front door of the flat.

As soon as she stepped into the hall Mrs. Piatt popped out of her room on the ground floor. Mrs. Piatt, the owner of the house, was an elderly widow, plump and beady-eyed, who took the keenest personal interest in the doings of her tenants.

'Your mum's gone,' she announced with fine dramatic effect. She waited for some interesting reaction from Toni, and, getting none, she fumbled in the pocket of her apron and drew forth a note. 'She left you this.'

Toni unfolded the single sheet with numb, wet fingers and read, 'Dearest: Plans have altered and I've gone on ahead. All well, explanations when you join me. I have packed your case all but the evening dress. Benjamin is

arranging for his chauffeur to collect you about half past six. In haste, Love, Mum. P.S. Don't forget to turn off the pilot light on the gas fire.'

Mrs. Piatt was waiting eagerly, beady eyes bright with interest. 'You'll have to go by train, then?' She knew all about the Warrens' Christmas visit to their rich relatives in Gloucestershire.

'Oh no. No, I don't think so.' Toni edged towards the staircase.

'They'll be sending a car for you?'

'Yes, that's right. Thank you for giving me this, Mrs. Piatt.' She bolted up the stairs, closed the door and leaned her back against it.

The flat felt cold and clammy. She lit the gas fire, pulled the curtains and put a saucer under her umbrella, which was making a pool on the floor. The obvious place to leave umbrellas to drip was outside the flat door, but Mrs. Piatt was apt to confiscate any articles left in the hall or in the landing. She shook her coat and hung it to dry on the back of the chair. Then she looked at the time and found it was five past six. She must get busy if she were to be ready when this chauffeur man arrived. That was just another aspect among all the unfortunate aspects of this affair - that she should now find herself with the prospect of a long drive into the country alone, or rather with some unknown chauffeur, who would certainly guess that she wasn't accustomed to being driven by chauffeurs, and despise her accordingly. 'Bah!' said Toni aloud, in disgust, and went into the bedroom to change her clothes.

She wondered if there were any hot water. Mrs. Piatt was not too generous with the boiler, but the occupants of the other flat on this floor were away, so there might be a hope. Pulling off her office clothes, Toni slipped on her wrap and padded along the landing to the shared bathroom. The water was just hot enough for a quick plunge and a brisk rub down, by which time she was pink and glowing and the shivering had stopped - so she couldn't have 'flu after all.

As she opened the bathroom door the front bell rang below. Mrs. Piatt would not allow individual bells in the flats. She liked to know (as she put it) who was in the house, and she invariably answered the front door herself. If the

caller was someone she knew, she graciously allowed them to proceed. If not, they had to wait in the hall while the landlady herself announced their arrival to her tenant Toni peeped through the landing window and saw a long sleek car standing at the kerb. She leaned over the banisters, heard Mrs. Piatt's voice, and a man's voice replying, and called down, 'Is it for me, Mrs. Piatt? Would you ask him to wait, please. Ill only be a few minutes.'

Suddenly footsteps took the linoed stairs two at a time. Toni, her flimsy wrap flying open, turned to scuttle back into her room at the same moment that Gray Lawrence rounded the corner of the staircase and confronted her. For one petrified moment she stared at him, feeling the heat surge into her face. Then she clutched the wrap ineffectively round her naked body and fled into the bedroom, slamming the door.

When she emerged, in sweater and trousers, he was standing by the gas fire, tall and lean and arrogant, warming his hands. He turned as she came in. 'Well met, Antonia. Very well met indeed,' he added meaningly, his glance passing slowly over the crimplene sweater and the dark brown trousers. 'I must say I preferred the earlier costume, but perhaps the weather demands something less - revealing.'

Her heart had not got over the shock of the sudden encounter on the landing and was still thumping uncomfortably. 'Mrs. Piatt shouldn't have let you come up like that,' she said. 'She doesn't, usually, and I thought—'

He was smiling now, a mocking smile that did nothing to dispel her discomfort. 'Don't tell me you were embarrassed? I should have thought that two years in London - it *was* two years, wasn't it? - would have altered all that.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said shortly. It had been a tiring, depressing day and she felt totally inadequate to keep up her end in a verbal battle with this infuriating man. 'I was expecting Mr. Warren's chauffeur,' she said, and only too late realized the ridiculous implication of her words.

He burst out laughing. 'Oh well, if your taste runs to chauffeurs—!'

She flung away from him. 'Oh, you're - you're hateful! Have you really come to drive me to Gloucestershire?'

'I'm afraid so. Terribly galling for you, after your last crushing exit line to me. You specialize in saying haughty and final good-byes, don't you? Too bad you have to keep recanting when we meet again.'

'I don't recant,' she said. 'If it means what I think it means. Anyway, you can't pretend *you're* pleased that we've met again.'

His mouth twisted. 'I never pretend,' he said, 'but I always bow to the inevitable. It was inevitable that Benjamin would persuade you to visit him. I don't blame you for one moment, you'd have been very silly to refuse wouldn't you? - in the circumstances.' He glanced round the flat, at the threadbare carpet, the cheap, cheerful curtains, the umbrella dripping into the saucer. For a moment she saw it all through his eyes, and then she was ashamed, and hated herself. Hated him, too.

'Are you trying to be insulting?' Her face burned.

The dark eyebrows lifted. 'Insulting? Why should I want to insult you? I'm simply being realistic, that's all. I've learned to value the truth above everything else. I invariably tell the truth myself, though perhaps not the whole truth. Nobody can do that, and if you swear under oath to tell the whole truth you're lying before you begin, in my opinion. But at least I speak my mind, as you've probably noticed, even though it isn't acceptable to everyone.'

'I see,' she said coldly. Conversation with this man was obviously going to be impossible. She pulled her coat from the back of the chair where it had been drying before the fire.

'Allow me.' He took the coat out of her hands and held it for her. After a moment's hesitation she slipped her arms into it. Did his hands rest on her shoulders a moment longer than was necessary, or was she imagining it? As she drew away she saw his eyes, flecked, mocking, and she was sure it had been deliberate.



'Are your bags ready to carry down?' he asked.

'Yes. No. I mean, there are just one or two more things to check.' She put a hand to her forehead as if she could wipe away the confusion she felt there. She was very tired and this man had an uncomfortably disturbing effect on her. 'Would you mind waiting a bit longer?'

'As long as you like,' he said. 'It will give the traffic time to thin out.'

She went into the bedroom and folded the evening dress, thanking heaven for uncrushable fabrics, for her movements were jerky and not quite under control. Then she gathered her toilet things from the dressing table and began to throw them hurriedly into her vanity case, uneasily aware that Gray Lawrence had followed her and was leaning against the doorpost, watching her.

His glance travelled round the small room with its pretty flowered curtains and covers, and handmade rugs on the floor. 'Cosy!' he remarked. '\*Who sleeps in the other twin bed?'

'My mother,' she said.

'Ah yes, I'd forgotten your mother. And your mother's in Gloucestershire at this moment, isn't she?' he went on musingly, as if some inviting idea was suggesting itself to him. And to her? She didn't know; this was a situation that she had, up to now, encountered only in books or on television.

The silence lengthened. She rummaged wildly through the dressing table drawer, her breathing shallow, her throat constricted. He didn't move from the doorway, but at last he lifted his head and surveyed the ceiling. 'The traffic,' he said, 'takes some time to to thin out.'

There was no longer any doubt in her mind. She turned and met his eyes. 'Then there's no point in waiting, is there?' she said.

'Ha!' he burst out triumphantly, 'Not so innocent, after all! I thought we might find out soon.'

Fury gripped her, chasing away her tiredness. 'So you were just baiting me? Trying to find out what sort of a girl I was? You didn't—' She broke off, horrified at what she had been going to say.

He strolled across the room towards her, smiling. 'I didn't intend it as an invitation, is that what you were going to say? Disappointed?'

She banged down the lid of her suitcase and clicked the lock with shaking fingers. 'You're insulting and - and hateful, and I don't want you to drive me to Gloucestershire. Please go now. I'll find my own way.'

He didn't move. 'It's four miles from the nearest railway station, even if you can get a train. A beautiful house, but isolated,' he went on thoughtfully, as if to himself. 'A long drive, lined with trees - lime trees, every bare branch dripping rain, cold and wet, turning the drive into a series of puddles. There *is* one taxi, but he'll be booked up on Christmas Eve, no doubt.' He turned to the door. 'I'll tell your mother you'll be joining us later, shall I? You've got the address, of course?'

She hadn't. Her mother had made all the arrangements for the journey. For the whole of these last two weeks Toni had worked very late and got home fagged out. Her mother's enthusiastic plans and chatter had washed over her without leaving much impression. She seemed to remember that the name of the house was White something. White Gables? Whitefriars? White - oh, she couldn't remember. She couldn't remember the name of the village, either.

Suddenly her knees sagged and she sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, her head bent to hide the tears that flooded into her eyes. She fought with the weakness, blinking the tears away, and in a moment was able to look up again. Gray Lawrence was standing at the foot of the bed, regarding her keenly. 'You're tired,' he said, and it was a statement of fact, not of sympathetic understanding. 'When did you last eat?'

'I - can't remember,' she said vaguely, rubbing an ache at the back of her neck, brought on by long hours of typing. 'I'm all right.' She tried to stand up again, but her legs refused.

'You're not all right,' he said firmly. 'I've no wish to have to have you pass out on me on the journey. You'd better have something to eat here before we start.'

'I'm not going with—'

'Oh yes, you are,' he said in a tone of quiet authority. 'You rest here for a bit while I go and find something in the larder.' Without fuss he lifted her from the side of the bed and laid her down in the middle of it, covering her legs with an eiderdown from the other bed. At the door he paused and looked round. 'I *wasn't* only baiting you, you know,' he said quietly. 'But don't worry. I don't take advantage of any woman's weakness.'

He went out into the kitchenette and she lay back and closed her eyes. He had told her he always stuck to the truth and she believed him. It was odd that she should believe him so readily when she disliked him so much, but there it was. She was far too tired to attempt to analyse her reactions.

He was back surprisingly soon with two cups of steaming coffee and a pile of cheese sandwiches. 'I take no credit,' he said. 'This was all left ready.'

She sat up and bit into a cheese sandwich, subtly flavoured with a tangy sauce. Mrs. Warren made wonderful sandwiches. When Toni had eaten three of them and drunk a cup of coffee she laid her head back with a sigh. 'That's better. You were right, I *was* hungry. Won't you have one?' She held out the plate of sandwiches to him.

He shook his head. He had retired to the farthest corner of the small bedroom and was leaning against the wardrobe, his cup of coffee in his hand. 'No, thanks. I had a meal on the plane.'

'Plane?'

'I've just come back from Paris. I've been there for the last fortnight, looking after things at our branch there.'

Toni pushed back the eiderdown, swung her trousered legs over the edge of the bed and stood up. She was still wearing her tweed coat; she hoped that

the creases would fall out, for at the moment it looked a wreck. It would be awful to arrive at Benjamin's opulent residence looking as if she had slept in her clothes. She smoothed out the creases anxiously.

Gray Lawrence took a couple of steps across the room and put down his cup with a clatter. 'Don't do that,' he said tightly.

Toni looked up in surprise and saw that his face was suddenly grim. 'You look more like Midge than ever,' he said. 'She had a habit of doing that. Can we get going now - are you all right?' He picked up her cases. 'Anything else to do before we leave?'

She didn't argue any more about going with him. 'I'm ready,' she said in a small voice. How he must be hating her for reminding him of Midge, and everything that he had lost! She went through into the sitting room, turned off the gas fire and the pilot light, and, with a final look round to make sure that everything was in order, followed him down the stairs, pausing only to return Mrs. Piatt's over-cordial Christmas wishes, as that lady gazed, impressed, at the handsome figure of Toni's escort, and not at Toni herself.

The car was long, low and luxurious. Gray opened the door for her and then put her cases in the back and climbed in behind the wheel. Toni fumbled with her seat belt, but it was of a design she hadn't encountered before, and after waiting a moment or two Gray said impatiently, 'Here, let me fix it.' He leaned across her, adjusting the belt, and she was horrified to find that her pulses quickened at his nearness. But this time his hands did not linger. 'All right?' His tone was brusque and he didn't wait for an answer. 'We'll make back for Town. I have to call in at the workroom first and then we'll get on to the motorway.'

Toni had never driven in a car like this before. As it glided smoothly through the maze of outer London streets she would, she thought, have enjoyed it at any other time - with any other company. She glanced up at him, his profile outlined against the moving lights outside the car saw the bluntness of his nose, the hard line of his mouth and jaw. Not an easy man, she thought, arrogant, sardonic, intimidating if you allowed yourself to be intimidated. But over and above all that was something invisible, intangible, a masculine magnetism that was so strong you could almost feel yourself being drawn by

it. Vaguely she imagined the rich, sophisticated women who had no doubt been drawn by it, and decided that she didn't envy them. Her own dream of love and romance was something quite different. A countryman, she thought hazily, perhaps a farmer or a fruit grower, or something like that, with fair hair and blue eyes and a mouth that smiled easily. Someone like Adrian, the boy who had gone to Australia with his family. For so many years, as they grew up, he had been the one. When he went away she had imagined herself heartbroken. Perhaps hearts don't break at seventeen, but certainly there hadn't been anyone since who had touched her heart. Adrian was sheep-farming now. He had written once or twice and sent her a snapshot of himself in the outback, holding a sleek black horse, looking tanned and fabulous and suddenly a grown man. She had dreamed about the day that he would send for her to go out and marry him. Only by then Father was ailing and Mother was working all the hours of the day in the kitchen garden and half the night at her sewing and knitting, to earn enough money to keep them going, and even if Adrian had sent for her she couldn't have gone.

Then, after a time, the letters had stopped, and last year Mother had a letter from his mother, telling her about Adrian's wedding. Toni had cried over that, and for a week had gone about with a terrible sense of loss. Then she had forgotten it. But in a curious way the image of him remained. My fairy prince, she thought now, remembering what she had said to Benjamin, and she gave a soft little chuckle in her throat.

The man beside her threw a quick glance. 'You all right? Not passing out again?'

She pulled herself up on the soft leather seat. 'Quite all right,' she said, and added primly, 'Thank you.'

She thought she saw his eyebrows go up, but he said no more, and a few minutes later the car plunged into the maze of narrow streets behind Whitechapel Road and pulled up before a shabby wooden door with no name on it. Gray said, 'I'll have to take you up with me, I can't leave you here alone, even in the car.'

She said innocently, 'Why?'

'Strange things can happen to cars around here,' said Gray.

'But surely, if there's someone in the car, they wouldn't—'

He gave her a very grim look. 'If it's someone who looks like you look, then they certainly *would*. Come on, out you get!'

She shrugged and obeyed. He locked up the car, sent a raking glance up and down the almost empty street, and led the way along a passage and up a flight of rickety stairs into a large, shabby room. Toni followed him, looking around her with interest. So this was Warrens' workroom; this was the place where those glittering brooches and rings she had seen in the Bond Street shop were made! There was certainly no glitter or glamour here. In the light of the one lamp that was lit on the far side of the room she saw the bare wooden floor, the row of benches on three sides of the room, each divided from its neighbour by partitions. On the fourth side of the room loomed heavier equipment, bulky and mysterious, in the shadows. Under the solitary light sat the only occupant of the room, and he got to his feet immediately they came in. He was middle-aged and stocky, with thinning hair, and he wore a thick white apron.

Gray strode across to him. 'Hullo, Joe, hope I haven't kept you from decorating the Christmas tree for the kids.'

'Hullo, Mr. Gray. No, I leave all that lark to the wife. There was plenty to keep me here, clearing up. I sent the rest of the lads off early. Mr. Benjamin rang me to say you'd be coming in to collect some stuff. I've got it ready for you.' He opened a drawer and handed a small parcel to Gray, who placed it carefully in an inside pocket. 'Take care of it, Mr. Gray, it's a nice bit of work.'

Gray nodded, patting his pocket. 'I'll do that, Joe. Mr. Benjamin didn't say why he wanted it at home?'

'Not exactly, Mr. Gray. That it—' He stopped, looking over Gray's shoulder to where Toni stood in the shadows. 'I beg your pardon, miss, I didn't see you there.'

Gray looked round. 'Sorry, Joe, I should have introduced you. Antonia, this is Joe Lattimer, who knows all there is to be known about making jewellery, the man who keeps Warrens on its feet. Joe, meet Miss Warren, Mr. Benjamin's great-niece, who is spending Christmas with us.'

Toni held out her hand. 'How are you, Mr. Lattimer,' she said, and smiled at him. She liked the look of this stolid man who appeared so ordinary yet was evidently a master craftsman of great skill.

Joe Lattimer took her hand, blinking at her as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Then he turned to Gray. 'I can't credit it, Mr. Gray. It's just as if - as if—'

'—as if my wife had come back? Yes, Joe, I know.'

Joe looked suddenly stricken. 'Mr. Gray, I'm sorry, that was a tactless thing to say. I shouldn't have said it. But it struck me so suddenly that it - it just came out. I'm sorry,' he said again.

'Don't worry, Joe, it's not your fault. We all felt that way at first, but we're getting used to it now, aren't we, Antonia?' The look he gave her was faintly malicious and she made no reply. Instead she went towards the work bench beneath the one light, where Joe had been sitting when they came in.

'It's fascinating.' She looked closer at the rows of tiny drawers, each labelled, at the tools hanging from racks fixed on the partitions: tiny hammers and mallets, files, saws, and others she didn't recognize. Everything was miniature, doll- size. 'And were all those beautiful things I saw in Bond Street really made here?' she asked Joe.

'All made on the premises, miss. We make everything here ourselves, except the watches. The watches come from Switzerland, o'course. Nobody can make watches like the Swiss. You just take a look at this one, Miss Warren, it's just come in today.'

He opened a drawer, but Gray had stepped into the ring of light round the bench. 'Sorry, Joe, you'll have to show Miss Warren another time. We've got quite a drive before us and it's a filthy night.'

Joe hastily closed the drawer again. 'Of course, Mr. Gray, I wasn't thinking. Perhaps you'll bring Miss Warren in again? That's if you'd like to see what we do here, miss?' He looked hopefully at Toni out of his cheery brown eyes. He was rather like a good-looking monkey, she thought, a little wizened, very alert.

'I would like to, very much,' she said. That, at least, was true, she thought as they took their leave of Joe. She *would* like to come again, but it wouldn't happen, for after this visit her Cinderella role would be over. On that she was absolutely determined. Not even to make her mother's dreams come true, not even to please Benjamin, would she let herself be made a stand-in for a girl she apparently resembled in looks, but probably not in any other way. How could she possibly take the place of a girl who had been brought up to accept luxury and riches as something to be taken for granted?

They left London by the motorway and Gray gave all his attention to his driving. The Christmas Eve traffic was heavy and the rain was still pouring down. Toni settled down comfortably. She would have liked to ask how far it was, how long it would take, but the man beside her showed no inclination to talk, and in any case the less conversation they had with each other the better. She fixed her eyes on the road. Headlights of approaching cars flared whitely and disappeared. The windscreen wipers waved backwards and forwards with hypnotic regularity. After a while she slept.

She opened her eyes to find they had left the motorway and were driving more slowly along a narrow road which dipped and rose and twisted and turned like a switchback railway. She sat up, blinked, and pushed back her hair.

'Had a nice sleep?' Gray Lawrence's voice came from the darkness beside her. Even when asking such a simple question, he couldn't keep the mocking tone out of it.

'Yes, thank you,' she said wearily.

'What have you been up to recently, that's knocked all the stuffing out of you?' he inquired. 'Doing some late night entertaining since Mother went away? Making the most of the spare bed, perhaps?'



'I find your innuendoes in very bad taste, Mr. Lawrence,' she said stiffly. 'But if you are really interested, I've had a very busy time this last fortnight; half the office staff have been off with 'flu. And in any case, my mother only left this afternoon,' she added.

'Too bad!' His chuckle turned into a smothered exclamation and the car stopped with a sudden swoosh that threw her forward against the restraining seat-belt. 'Blast!' muttered Gray. 'I ought to have known this might happen.'

Toni sat up and peered ahead. It seemed very dark outside and she realized that the headlights had gone out. She looked through the side window and, after a moment, saw that the car was apparently surrounded by water on all sides.

Beside her, Gray made a jerky, irritable movement. 'This damned lane's been flooded before. Why the hell didn't I think of it?'

Toni didn't suppose he expected an answer, but he was going to get one all the same; the opportunity to get a little of her own back was too good to be missed. 'Probably,' she said, 'because you were so busy baiting me that you weren't attending to your driving.'

She heard his quick intake of breath. 'My God,' he said bitterly, 'you even sound like her sometimes. One of these days I'll forget I'm not your husband.'

She felt a strong twinge of fear. She should have known it was dangerous to needle a man like Gray Lawrence. He would only make it an excuse to - to what—? In the darkness she drew as far away from him as she could, feeling the seat-belt straining across her body, her heart thumping uncomfortably.

\*Don't worry.' His voice was dry and impersonal. 'The time and place are hardly right, are they?'

She let herself relax a little and she heard his laugh come out of the darkness. 'You don't trust me, do you?'

'No,' she said quickly, and wondered if that were true. Somewhere underneath his mocking, devil-may-care attitude she imagined she could feel strength, integrity. 'Are you to be trusted?'

'Probably not,' he said shortly. She could feel him groping in his pocket. 'Cigarette?'

'No, thanks, I don't smoke.'

There was the scratch of a lighter and she saw his face momentarily in the tiny glow, dark and frowning, his hair falling forward as he bent his head over the cigarette. A cloud of smoke engulfed them both and he waved it away with his hand. 'Sorry. It's a horrible habit, but on some occasions I need it.' He smoked in silence for a minute or two and then said briskly, 'Now then, to work. Let's see what the prospects are. Will you have a look in the glove compartment on your side - I think there's a torch in there.'

She found it and handed it to him, watched while he peered at the dashboard, turned switches with no response at all, and finally opened his door and leaned out. From underneath them there was a gurgling sound and he shut the door again smartly. 'The prospects,' he said, 'are not good. We're completely waterlogged up to the axle, and I assume the whole of the wiring system has packed up.'

'Where are we?' Toni asked in a small voice. Up to now she hadn't taken their position very seriously, but with the heater ceasing to function the inside of the car was beginning to get very cold and there was something forlorn and depressing about their isolated position in the dark, with the rain still lashing down all round them. It seemed odd, too, when she came to think of it, that no other cars had appeared for ages. 'How far away from Uncle Benjamin's home?'

'About two miles. We're in a lane - actually you might call it a service lane - that goes up to Whiteways, and a couple of cottages, and that's all. It's very unlikely that anything will pass this way, on a night like this. People will almost certainly know that the river has flooded and stay inside their own four walls.'

'But won't Uncle Benjamin guess that we might be stranded?'

'Eventually, he probably will. Sooner or later a rescue party will probably be sent out to look for us, but it may be later instead of sooner. We've made pretty good time from London and I don't suppose they'll begin to wonder about us just yet. It may be hours before they do. Meanwhile, if we don't get out of here ourselves we shall just have to sit and shiver, which isn't a very pleasant way of spending Christmas Eve.'

'Couldn't we get out and walk the rest of the way?'

'Walk? You'd be prepared to walk two miles on a night like this?' He sounded staggered.

'Why not? I've lived in the country most of my life. I'm not afraid of a spot of rain.'

He seemed to consider that. Then he said, 'I think the best thing is to leave you here while I walk up to the house. Then I can bring back a car from there and pick you up. I'd be back for you in under an hour.'

She said, 'If you're going, then I'm coming with you. I'm certainly not going to sit here in the dark alone for an hour.'

'Well, that settles it,' he said grimly. '*I'm* certainly not going to risk you getting soaked through and spending Christmas getting over pneumonia. So - if you won't stay by yourself - we'll both stay together. And in the time-honoured fashion of the babes in the wood, we may as well make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Thank goodness for a bench front seat, at all events. It might be rather impracticable to wade round to the back.' He leaned over and pulled a thick, soft rug from the back seat and arranged it over Toni's legs and his own. He undipped his seat belt and moved close to her, tucking the rug round them both. Then he stretched out and switched off the torch, which was resting on the dashboard ledge, and darkness engulfed them again.

'Comfy?' His voice came from somewhere just above her head. Her heart thumped in the region of her throat and her mouth was so dry that she

couldn't say a word. She nodded in the darkness. 'Good,' he said in a businesslike tone. 'And now you'd better go to sleep again. We may have to wait some time before they send someone out from the house to look for us, and I don't feel particularly like indulging in light conversation.'

Sleep? she thought wildly. How could she possibly go to sleep when her whole body was rigid with an agitation that she had never experienced in her life before? Being in such intimate closeness to a complete stranger might not cause him any embarrassment, but it was affecting her unbearably. She sat stiffly, squeezed as far into her own corner as she could get, her breathing shallow and uneven. How long she could stay like this she didn't know, but after a few minutes he moved beside her. 'Good heavens, girl, relax, can't you? I'm not a monster of depravity, and I'm not enjoying this little caper any more than you appear to be, but we're stuck with each other until someone turns up, so we may as well make the best of it. I assure you that at the present moment my natural inclinations are well under control. Look, no hands!' he added sardonically. She couldn't see, but she was aware that he was waving his hands above the rug. 'Satisfied?'

'Yes,' whispered Toni uncertainly. She wriggled lower in the seat, tried her head this way and then that, and found that in whichever position she chose, it tended to flop uncomfortably. She rested it against the window frame and that was even worse - hard and cold. While she was wriggling about in an effort to get comfortable he didn't move, and now the warmth from his body reached her, her hand touched the smooth cloth of his jacket, his shoulder was on a line with her cheek. Well, why not? she thought, and she let her head droop towards him, rest against his chest.

'That's more sensible,' he said, and his voice was so matter-of-fact that it seemed quite natural that his left arm should go round her, holding her still more comfortably. 'Now, go to sleep again, there's a good girl,' he said, and she felt so warm and hazy that she didn't even trouble to wonder why he should phrase it like that. Obediently, she closed her eyes and drifted away into a state between waking and sleeping, vague and oddly blissful.

It could have been five minutes or five hours later that Gray's voice roused her. 'Here we are,' it said. 'The rescue squad has arrived.'

Toni opened her eyes and lifted her head, to be half blinded by the glare of headlights shining straight into the car. Gray's arm was still around her and, although she tried to move away from it, it held her fast as he leaned across and wound down the window on her side. 'Who is it?' he shouted, and a voice from the other vehicle, which had stopped - probably at the edge of the flood water - shouted back, 'Is that you, Gray? It's Dominic. Can you wade out or do you want a tow?'

'Hang on, I'll be with you.' Gray pulled himself up in the seat. 'Sir Lancelot to the rescue of the beautiful princess,' he murmured to Toni with his usual edge of mockery, 'you're quite safe now, my sweet.'

And then, to her amazement and utter confusion, in the floodlit view of whoever it was driving the other car, he tipped back her head and kissed her hard and deliberately, full on her mouth. 'Happy Christmas, Antonia,' said Gray, against her lips.

## CHAPTER FOUR

'I was really getting quite worried about you, dear.' Mrs. Warren took the supper tray from Toni's lap and put it on the tallboy in the corner of the bedroom. 'Benjamin insisted that you would be absolutely safe with Mr. Lawrence, but I think he was a little anxious too. Then this young man Dominic offered to go out and see if he could see anything of you. Apparently the river does flood occasionally, and of course, that was what had happened. Now are you *sure* you've had enough to eat, dear?'

Toni and her mother were in the warm, comfortable bedroom that had been allotted to Toni. Benjamin had insisted on her going straight off to bed as soon as he had greeted her. 'You look tired out, Antonia,' he had said kindly. 'Your mother has been telling me how busy you have been in these last two weeks. Now you must have a really good rest and then you'll be ready to enjoy the festivities tomorrow.'

Toni had agreed gratefully. The last thing she wanted was to be in the company of Gray Lawrence any longer, she had had quite enough of his disturbing presence since the moment he had walked up the stairs and almost collided with her in her scanty attire. That must have been - she glanced at her watch and saw that it was nearly half past ten - nearly four hours ago. Incredible. It seemed more like four days. The whole episode was assuming too much importance in her mind, she told herself. And his kiss! Her cheeks still flamed as she remembered it. Why had he chosen to kiss her then, when he was quite sure that this Dominic man would be a ringside spectator? Rather like some wild animal, she thought extravagantly, warning off all other males. But that, of course, was absurd. Oh well, she must try to forget it - it was probably nothing more than a normal masculine urge. But she still had an odd weakness inside when she remembered the feeling of his mouth on hers, the pressure of his lips hard and almost hostile and yet - she had to admit it - dangerously exciting.

She turned to her mother, who was unpacking her suitcase and hanging her clothes in the built-in wardrobe which ran the whole length of one side of the room. 'Put me in the picture, Mother. Are there lots of people staying here? Who is this man Dominic who came out to find us?' She had not seen their rescuer properly. After that devastating kiss, Gray had flung open the car

door and plunged almost knee-deep into the flood water, leaning back into the car to hoick her out and carry her, like a sack of potatoes, to the dry part of the lane, where they both climbed into what looked like a Land Rover and were driven up to the house. In the circumstances introductions would have seemed rather absurd, and certainly none had been attempted. As soon as she had been delivered into the welcoming warmth of the house, the two men had gone back to attend to the marooned car.

Her mother swished the wardrobe door to, and came and perched on the edge of the bed, looking like a perky robin in her red knitted jumper. 'There isn't anyone staying except us, dear, although we shall be six for dinner tomorrow - Benjamin himself, of course, and you and I, and Mr. Lawrence, and Dominic Finch and his sister Ann. Dominic is the manager of Benjamin's estate and farm here, and he and his sister live in one of the cottages in the grounds. I haven't met her yet; she teaches at the local school, I understand. Dominic is a charming young man - very good-looking. He reminds me of someone, but I can't quite remember who—'

Toni smiled. It didn't take her mother long to get to know everybody. Sometimes she wished that she, too, were an extrovert, and had the knack of making friends with everyone she met.

'And why did you have to rush off and leave me in the lurch like that?' she inquired, with a grin that took any reproach from the words.

'Oh yes, it was such a shame, wasn't it? Were you very angry with me, dear?' Mrs. Warren's brown eyes were anxious and contrite. 'It was all so complicated. Benjamin had to go to Birmingham this morning and he left it to his secretary - a Mrs. Janes - to deal with. Mrs. Janes rang me up this morning to say that the housekeeper here had had to go into hospital for an emergency operation, and would we mind coming a little earlier than we had fixed, so that I could keep an eye on things. Everything was prepared and all the shopping done and so on, but the two young maids are very new and raw, and couldn't take the responsibility. Of course, I said that I'd be pleased to come and help, but I was afraid that *you* wouldn't be able to manage it. Well, the secretary rang back after a while to say she'd made arrangements for me to be met at the station off the early train from London, and for the chauffeur to collect you at half past six. At least, I *thought* she said the chauffeur, but

Mrs. Piatt was snooping about all the time I was speaking on the phone in the hall, and I got a little rattled. But it couldn't have been "chauffeur" she said, could it, because he drove Benjamin here from Birmingham. They arrived soon after I did. Oh dear, what a mix-up it all was for you, Toni. I'm so sorry.'

'It didn't matter,' said Toni. 'I just wondered what had happened. I was expecting a chauffeur, and then this Mr. Lawrence turned up.'

Her mother shot her a keen glance. 'What's the matter, dear? Don't you like Mr. Lawrence?'

'No,' said Toni, 'I do *not* like Mr. Lawrence. I think he's just about the most unlikeable man I've ever met.'

Mrs. Warren leaned across the bed and patted her daughter's hand placatingly. 'You mustn't judge too soon, dear.'

Benjamin has been telling me all about Mr. Lawrence. He was married to Benjamin's granddaughter, you know, the girl who was killed so tragically, and—'

'Yes,' put in Toni, 'I know. My double, apparently. Everyone who knew her blinks when they see me. I feel like a ghost.'

Mrs. Warren looked startled. 'Oh, I didn't know that. That would explain - but I was telling you about Mr. Lawrence. Apparently he was passionately in love with his wife and after her death he seemed to change. He was always a very positive personality, Benjamin said, but now he's getting quite bitter and cynical and - and sort of wild. Benjamin sounded quite worried about it. He seems to think a great deal of Mr. Lawrence - certainly he relies on him in the business, now that he's getting older himself and wanting to take things more easily.' She stood up. 'Now, no more talking, Toni dear. You're going to settle down and have a good night's sleep, and then we'll have a lovely day tomorrow.' She sighed rapturously. 'Just imagine us spending Christmas in a beautiful house like this! I'm longing for you to see it all.'



She bent over and kissed Toni. 'Goodnight, my darling. I'm so happy. I feel that a new chapter is just beginning for both of us.' And before Toni could think of anything to say to that, her mother had smiled lovingly at her and departed.

A moment later she was back. 'Oh, I forgot, dear. I've left you some biscuits and a flask of hot milk on the writing table, and there are one or two magazines, just in case you don't feel like sleeping straight away. But I'm sure you should settle down soon. I'll have one of the girls bring you up some breakfast in the morning and then you can get up at your leisure.'

When her mother had finally gone Toni sat up in bed, leaning against the embroidered linen pillow cover, and looked round the room thoughtfully. It was small and simply furnished, but everything about it - the soft green walls toning with the patterned curtains and bedspread in a splodgy flower motif of violets and lilies of the valley, the pale satin-smooth wood of the writing table, tallboy, and the sliding doors, ceiling high, of the built-in wardrobe; the sumptuous white rugs on the polished floor - everything spoke of a way of life where the cost of things was a secondary consideration.

Her eyes fell on the Wedgwood biscuit barrel on the side table, the thermos beside it, the pile of glossy magazines, the tiny white vase with a spray of snowdrops, all put there by her mother. Toni frowned faintly without realizing she was doing so. Her mother had been here only a few hours, yet already there was a change in her. She had a kind of glow about her, a new confidence. She was behaving like a - a hostess, like someone who had been accustomed to this kind of privileged existence all her life. It was lovely to see her so happy, and yet - and yet—! Little doubts came up and nagged at the back of Toni's mind. How would her mother ever settle down again in the humble little flat in Hornsey, after a taste of this kind of luxury? For some reason Gray Lawrence's words came back to her: 'You'll find the circumstances very much to your advantage,' he had said, with the cynical twist to his mouth that seemed to accompany everything he saw fit to say to her. For a moment she wondered how he would behave to a girl he liked and admired. Or did he treat all women as he treated her, with a kind of contempt?

She sighed and gave it up. Then, because she was desperately tired, she switched off the light, snuggled down in the swan-soft bed, and was asleep within minutes.

Toni wakened to see a girl of about fourteen, tallish and gawky in a blue nylon overall, pulling the curtains. The pale winter sunshine was filtering into the room through the bare branches of a tree outside the window, and Toni blinked sleepily, pushing back her mane of red-gold hair. 'Hullo,' she said, sitting up, 'Who are you?'

The girl turned round, smiling broadly. 'I'm Shirley, miss,' she said in a West Country drawl that made Toni feel she was back in Devon. 'I've brought you your breakfast and Mrs. Warren says will you excuse her just now. She's in the middle of stuffing the turkey. She says to come down when you're ready, but there's no hurry.'

Having painstakingly delivered her message Shirley made for the door, stopped and said, 'Isn't your hair just super? I wish I had hair that colour.' She tweaked disparagingly at her somewhat lank brown hair. 'You're just like the photograph of you in the drawing-room. I thought when I was dusting it, I bet that hair colour's touched up, but I can see as it isn't. Aren't you lucky?' She stared admiringly for a moment and then went out and closed the door.

The breakfast tray was on the table beside the bed. Toni lifted it on to her knees, reflecting ruefully that it didn't look as if she was ever going to be allowed to be herself in this house. But she cheered up when she saw the extra large brown egg, the rack of crisp toast, the pats of yellow country butter. Against a dish of marmalade was propped a slip of paper. 'Happy Christmas, darling,' was scrawled in her mother's writing. 'The happiest for years.' Toni smiled and poured out some coffee. She might as well enjoy her few days of gracious living; after all, she had agreed to come, so it would be mean to be all proud and prickly. She would make a point of keeping out of Gray Lawrence's way as far as possible, which would make for a more peaceful time for both of them, as they seemed to bring out the worst in each

other. Having come to that sensible decision she applied herself with appreciation to her breakfast.

When she had drained the coffee-pot to the last drop she got out of bed and went to look out of the window. Last night she had only got the haziest impression of the house, mostly an impression of warmth and comfort and a cheerful log fire in the hall, where Benjamin had settled her in a deep chintzy chair, with a drink which dispelled her damp chilliness very rapidly. Now, looking down across the width of lawns and formal flower-beds, bare now, with the promise of spring flowering still far away, she saw that Whiteways was one of those old Gloucestershire houses that she had sometimes read about in magazines; gracious manor houses tucked away in the fold of the hills, dating from the days when the wool trade of England - and probably of the world - had its centre here, where long-fleeced Cotswold sheep bred thickly over the rolling fields. There were still a few sheep to be seen, dotted about the hills that spread out beyond the garden. This would be part of the farm that her mother was talking about last night, the home farm managed by the young man called Dominic who had come to their rescue last night. And he and his sister would be joining them for dinner. That was good. The more people there were here to provide a buffer between her and the Lawrence man, the better. For a moment the scene outside the window blurred and she saw again the tall, lounging, sardonic person of Gray Lawrence, saw the ironic twist to his mouth, the mocking light in the greenish flecked eyes, looking into her own with arrogant challenge. A little shiver passed through her and she turned away quickly to the shower-room adjoining her bedroom.

Half an hour later, having enjoyed a slow and luxurious toilet - such a lovely change from her usual scramble to dress and rush through breakfast in time for the office - Toni made her way downstairs, wearing the new cinnamon brown dress that blended perfectly with her hair. As she reached the bottom steps of the wide oak staircase she paused, looking down into the hall below. More and more the house seemed to resemble one of those pictures in the glossy magazines. It was not overpoweringly large, but everything she saw seemed to her perfect of its kind. It was the kind of room that made her wish she knew something about old furniture, but even though she knew nothing of the age or history of the carved wooden chairs; the circular dining table in some lighter wood, lovingly polished for many, many years; the tapestries hanging on the panelled walls; the great clock ticking away heavily in a

corner; still she could appreciate the perfection of it all. It was, she realized, the kind of home that Benjamin Warren would have - distinguished, elegant, perfect. 'Hullo there, you must be Antonia.' She spun round to see a young man standing in a doorway behind her, smiling, a fair young man in riding breeches and a heavy Aran sweater.

'Standing there you look like an oil painting,' he said. 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti, I think, though my knowledge is limited. Please come down and let me introduce myself. We hardly met last night, did we, surrounded as we were by flood water, and you very much a damsel in distress.'

A damsel in distress— that was what Gray had called her. She came down the last few stairs, holding out her hand. 'Sir Lancelot, I presume?'

'The same,' he said, mock-serious. 'But don't let it get around. I'm generally supposed to be one Dominic Finch, farmer and gentleman.'

He took her hand and held it in both his; his hands were warm and dry with a light, friendly clasp. Then, looking hard into her face, he shook his head wonderingly. 'They warned me that you were the spittin' image of poor Midge, but my goodness, this is ridiculous!' His blue eyes were twinkling down at her. 'But don't let that bother you,' he smiled. 'I'm sure you're really very much yourself.'

She smiled back at him. She knew now who it was that her mother had been reminded of: Dominic Finch was the same type as Adrian, the boy who had gone to Australia. She warmed to him straight away.

'Thank you for those kind words. It's a bit unnerving when everyone stares at you as if they'd seen a ghost.'

'You're no ghost,' he said admiringly. He let her hand go, with obvious reluctance. 'Have you quite got over your adventure last night? Gray said you'd been sitting there for an hour or more before I arrived on the scene.'

She remembered what had happened at the moment that Dominic *had* arrived on the scene. She remembered all too vividly that unexpected,

possessive kiss, and she felt the heat rise to her cheeks. 'Had we? I wouldn't know. I'm afraid I simply went to sleep and waited for rescue to arrive.'

He nodded. 'Very wise of you! Nothing so off-putting as having the girl in your arms go to sleep. Even Gray might conceivably be discouraged by such lack of interest. He chuckled uncharitably. 'Serve him right. He's far too sure of himself with the women.'

Toni found that she didn't at all wish to discuss Gray's fascinating ways with women. She said, 'What happened to the car?'

'Still there, as far as I know. It was hopeless to try and tow it out last night in the dark, so we notified the police it was there and they came along and planted a couple of red lanterns on the lane, and that's all that we could do. Poor old Gray, that car was new only a couple of months ago. He must have been livid.' He chuckled again, and again she thought she heard a faint edge of malice. 'Still, *he* drove it into the water, he had nobody to blame but himself.' He lounged back against the heavy trestle table, his blue eyes fixed on Toni's face as if he were enjoying what he saw. 'So you're spending Christmas in our little backwater? That's a thought to gladden all hearts. Benjamin has talked of nothing else for the last fortnight or more. He's a great family man, is Benjamin - entirely without family until you turned up. Midge's accident broke him up for a long time.'

'You knew her?'

'Oh yes,' said Dominic. 'Everyone round here knew her. She was - quite a girl.' His eyes were suddenly thoughtful.

'She was - it was a car accident?' Toni was suddenly curious about this distant cousin of hers, this tragic girl who had had everything a girl could want - money, position, an adoring grandfather who indulged her, and a husband like Gray Lawrence who had loved her so passionately that he had gone off the rails with grief and bitterness when she had died. 'Was she driving herself?'

Dominic nodded. 'Yes, she—'

He broke off as a curt voice from the top of the staircase called his name. They both looked up to see Gray standing there, his face dark. Toni felt ridiculously like a schoolgirl who has been caught breaking rules. But Dominic didn't seem in the least abashed. 'Hullo, Sunshine,' he grinned. 'Happy Christmas.'

Gray came down the stairs to them. In his casual cords and roll-neck sweater he looked different from the man she had first seen across a desk in the Bond Street showrooms. Different, but no less imperious.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs, regarding the two of them coldly, then he concentrated his gaze on Dominic. 'Where the hell have you been? Benjamin's, expecting you to report. He's been waiting to see you before he gets up and dresses.'

Dominic's eyebrows went up comically. 'Dear, dear, in the doghouse, am I? I'd better go up and make my peace. See you, sweetheart.'

He touched Toni's shoulder lightly and ran up the stairs.

Gray stood there, regarding Toni in silence. When she could bear it no longer she said, 'Happy Christmas, Mr. Lawrence.'

To her amazement he smiled - a real smile, definitely no irony. It must be the Christmas spirit. 'And a happy Christmas to you, Antonia. Recovered from last night's ordeal?'

The steady scrutiny of his greenish eyes was having an unnerving effect on her pulse. 'Y-yes, thank you. It wasn't really an ordeal, was it? I mean, we were soon rescued.'

'Too soon for you?' he suggested, and now the irony was back again. 'Would you have liked to prolong such a romantic situation? We must see if we can repeat the performance some time, preferably without drowning my car in the process.'

She ignored the irony. She was almost getting used to it now. 'I'm sorry about the car,' she said. 'I hope it's not too badly damaged.'

He shrugged. 'I expect it'll survive.' He seemed to dismiss the subject. 'I'm afraid I broke up your tete-a-tete with friend Dominic. You appeared to be getting along very well together.'

Her cheeks went hot as she wondered how much he had heard of that conversation. From his expression she guessed that he had heard the last part, at least. 'Yes,' he said thoughtfully, reading her mind with maddening accuracy, 'I did hear what you were talking about. I can't make any demand on you, naturally, but I'd take it a favour if you'd ask *me* anything you want to know about my late wife.'

She couldn't have felt worse if he had slapped her face. But he gave her no opportunity to think of a reply. He said politely, 'Has anyone shown you your way around the house yet?'

She clutched thankfully at normality. 'No, not yet. I've only just come down. My breakfast was brought up to me in bed. I'm not used to such luxuries.'

'Don't worry, I'm sure you'll adapt in no time,' he drawled, and before she could think of any retort he went on smoothly, 'Where would you like to go first?'

Anywhere, away from you and your horrid cynical innuendoes, she thought, but she said, 'My mother is busy in the kitchen. I could help, perhaps, but I don't know where the kitchen quarters are.' She glanced round the hall with doors leading off it in all directions.

'Oh, I don't think you need bother. You're not exactly dressed for slaving over a hot stove, are you?' He looked her over slowly from head to foot, making her pulses throb uneasily. 'A pretty dress. You look like a little Puritan in that collar.' He flicked the point of the wide picture collar and added with his wry smile, 'How deceptive can appearances be?'

Suddenly Toni had had enough. Her grey eyes were bright and stormy. 'Look, Mr. Lawrence, I suppose you have your reasons for treating me as you do. It seems to give you pleasure to - to attack me and insult me, but it doesn't give me any pleasure, and enough is enough.'

He lifted his eyebrows. 'Insult you? You misjudge me, I'm certainly not trying to insult you. Surely you're not trying to tell me you don't know the rules of the game?'

She fell straight into the trap. 'What game?'

'There's only one game that I know between a man and a girl,' he said.

She felt the treacherous colour rising to her cheeks, but she wouldn't let herself be overwhelmed by his sophisticated mockery. 'I see,' she said. 'Well, I don't know the rules. I'm just a country girl at heart, didn't I explain that to you? And I'm not at all sure I want to learn the rules.'

He smiled incredulously. 'Oh, but surely you're not expecting me to believe that? Not of a girl like you?'

It was crazy, but she couldn't stop herself from rising to the bait. 'And what sort of a girl am I?' She leaned her head back against the carved wooden baluster, looking up at him under thick lashes, hardly conscious of the challenge in her eyes.

Suddenly and quite frighteningly his face changed. All the suave mockery had gone and in its place was hardness. 'You learn quickly, Miss Antonia Warren,' he said and she heard contempt in his voice. 'Come on, I'll show you round.'

He gripped her elbow and led her across the hall. For a second she contemplated trying to drag her arm away, but his fingers felt like steel through the soft sleeve of her dress. She glanced up at his face and saw that he was not really thinking about her at all at this moment. The foolish little spat between them had triggered off some memory that had brought back the bitterness. Goodness, she thought, halfway between pity and anger, it's like walking across a minefield!

The conducted tour was a somewhat grim affair. One by one he opened the panelled doors leading off the hall. 'This is the study, mostly used by Benjamin as a den and an office. This door opens into the morning room



with the conservatory beyond it. This is the dining-room. This passage goes to the kitchens and stillroom and so on.'

She tried to lighten the atmosphere. 'I feel quite overwhelmed. The whole of our little cottage in Devon would have fitted into one of these rooms.'

He opened the last door, ignoring her remark. 'And this is the drawing-room,' he announced.

She stood in the doorway and looked into a long, gracious room with wide french windows opening on to a terrace outside. Here was richness indeed. The carpet and curtains were in muted shades of cream and soft pinks, the delicately-fashioned chairs and sofas covered in pale satin. Above the long windows was a fanlight of painted glass panels in deep jewel colours. There were side tables of light- coloured wood, intricately inlaid, and bow-fronted cabinets behind the glass doors of which she could see *objets d'art* in silver and porcelain. From the ceiling hung a crystal chandelier, its delicate drops glittering like hanging cobwebs festooned with dew.

'Well?' Gray Lawrence's dry voice brought her back to earth.

She said wonderingly, 'It's the most beautiful room I've ever seen. But you couldn't - couldn't *sit* in it, surely? I mean, not in this day and age. It's a show place, just to look at.'

He raised dark eyebrows. Still with the bitter note in his voice he said, 'There are some who wouldn't think of it like that, who would consider this room a complement for their own personality, a background for their own beauty.' He strode across the room to the high marble fireplace and reached down a silver-framed portrait photograph. 'There you are,' he said harshly. 'Now do you understand why your intrusion here has caused such an impression?'

She took the photograph from him, holding it between hands that were not quite steady, and stared down at it. It gave her a strange, uncanny feeling to look into the face of this girl she was supposed to resemble. There was the same bright, red-gold hair, the same fair skin, the same bone structure. But for the rest—? She shook her head and handed the photograph back to Gray.

'I see the likeness, of course, but I wouldn't have thought it was all that striking. She has - had real beauty. I haven't.'

He replaced the silver frame on the mantelpiece. 'You can't see it because you're used to looking at yourself in a mirror,' he said unemotionally. 'Has it occurred to you that you never see yourself as other people see you? You see yourself in what they call, I believe, left-right reversal. If you put a photograph of yourself next to that one-' he nodded towards the mantelpiece '—I think you'd see what I mean.'

'I'm out of my depth,' she said. 'But I still don't think I'm so very like - like Midge.' She watched his face as she said the name, but his expression told her nothing.

As she turned her mother appeared in the doorway, face flushed and happy, arms full of greenery. 'Toni darling, you're here, I've been looking for you. Happy Christmas, love. And to you, Mr. Lawrence.' She smiled at Gray, who returned her greeting rather formally.

'I asked the gardener to cut these branches,' Mrs. Warren said. 'I mustn't bring them in here in case they drip on this beautiful carpet. I thought you might hang them in the hall, Toni, as we're going to have dinner there. Can you cope, do you think? Perhaps Mr. Lawrence would help you?' She smiled winningly at Gray, who said stiffly, 'I'm sorry, I must ask you to excuse me.' He nodded to them both and went out of the room.

Mrs. Warren sighed happily. 'Such an interesting man, isn't he?'

Toni exploded into half-impatient laughter. 'Mother! I believe you'd find something nice to say about the devil himself if he happened to be staying at Whiteways Manor.'

Her mother looked startled momentarily, before her smile returned. 'Perhaps I would,' she said comfortably. 'There's usually something nice you can find to say about most people, and probably the Old Gentleman himself is no exception.' She deposited her load of greenery on the floor in the hall. 'There you are, dear. If you'll come with me into the kitchen I'll show you where you can find a ladder. You could arrange some of the branches round the

banisters, couldn't you? Anyway, I'm sure you'll do it beautifully.' She looked round the hall delightedly. 'Isn't it just like a fairy tale to be spending Christmas in a place like this - with a real log fire too!'

She led the way into the kitchen and Toni followed. Christmas should be a happy time, but she couldn't rid herself of \*the uneasiness that lurked in her mind. It was partly because of her mother's ecstatic response to these surroundings; she was blossoming like a plant that is brought , into the light out of darkness. Toni wished she could feel the same. If it weren't for this stupid situation with Gray Lawrence she might do. She might be able to relax and enjoy herself. But instead she felt tense and vaguely apprehensive, as if her life were slipping out of her control.

But as she worked at decorating the hall a little of her uneasiness passed away. She threw another log on the fire and the smell of burning apple wood mingled with the sharp tang of pine. The hall was very quiet, with only a crackle of logs from the inglenook fireplace breaking the silence now and again. Nobody came in. Toni cut and snipped, climbed up and down the ladder, pushing the evergreen branches wherever she could persuade them to wedge themselves: behind the antlers and the old swords hanging in their polished sheaths; between the carved banisters; suspended by cord from the gallery above; even making a carefully- arranged garland for the tall grandfather clock.

At the bottom of the pile of green branches she found a bunch of mistletoe. She held it doubtfully, and just at that moment Dominic Finch came running down the stairs. He gazed appreciatively at the result of her efforts. ^Very nice indeed! The old place looks quite Dickensian. And where are you thinking of putting this tempting bit of decoration?' He took the mistletoe from her and held it up as if judging where it would look best.

'There doesn't seem to be any place for it in here,' Toni said. 'I'd better take it back into the kitchen.'

Dominic looked horrified. 'Oh no, what a waste! We must keep up tradition.' And before Toni realized what was happening he held the spray high over her head and kissed her soundly on her mouth.

It had to be at that moment that the front door opened and Gray Lawrence walked into the hall. Dominic, entirely unabashed, threw a salute in his direction. 'We're just trying out the mistletoe, it works splendidly. He offered the bunch to Gray. 'Try it yourself,' he suggested wickedly.

Gray gave him a withering look. 'I'll take your word for it,' he said curtly, and strode across the hall.

'Hey! Where's your Christmas spirit, buddy? *You* weren't losing any time last night in the car, were you? A pity I turned up so soon!'

Gray reached the study door and turned to look at the two of them, standing close together, while Dominic swung the mistletoe casually in his left hand. For a moment Toni was aware of a tension between the two men that surely had nothing to do with her. Then, 'Go to blazes,' said Gray softly and distinctly, and he went into the study and closed the door behind him.

Dominic looked at Toni, his fair eyebrows raised. 'Charming, I must say! Touchy devil, isn't he?' He laughed, but there was a faintly hollow ring to his laughter and Toni thought that he was nearly as much shaken by Gray's aggression as she was herself. He tossed the bunch of mistletoe on the table. 'Well, I hate to tear myself away, but I have a new foal to keep an eye on, and a few other odds and ends about the place. We'll meet again this evening, and I'm bringing my sister Ann along too. I want you to meet her, I'm sure you'll get along. Do you know what time we're bidden to the festive board?'

'My mother said about half past six. It's rather early, but she wants to give the two girls plenty of time to clear up afterwards and get home to the village.' She smiled. 'She's a born manager, is my mother, she thinks of little things like that. While the housekeeper is in hospital she seems to be taking charge of everything in the kitchen, and loving every minute of it.'

Dominic nodded. 'It's a lucky break that she's here to do it, or we shouldn't have had much joy in the Christmas dinner. Benjamin was very worried when Mrs. Pattinson was whisked away to hospital, and greatly relieved when your mother agreed to step into the breach. I met her briefly yesterday evening and I got the impression that she's tremendously capable - and a very nice person too.'

Toni smiled at him, pleased at his praise. 'She's a darling,' she said warmly. 'And an absolutely first-rate cook.'

He licked his lips. 'I can't wait to sample that turkey. See you about six then, sweetheart.'

She watched him walk across the hall with the easy, loping stride of the countryman and again he reminded her of Adrian. They weren't really very much alike, but there was the same touch of lightness, of fun. It was a blessing that he was here to act as an antidote to Gray Lawrence, who, to put it mildly, was anything but fun.

Benjamin came downstairs as Toni was tucking the mistletoe away behind a branch of holly that decorated the clock in the corner. She heard a step and turned to see him standing behind her, watching her with evident pleasure. She thought he looked older this morning, and a little tired, but perhaps that was just because of the clear light that came down from the high ceiling window. He wore a burgundy red velvet jacket, and his monocle hung from its ribbon round his neck. His white hair and beard were immaculate and he looked more distinguished than ever, Toni thought. A little shyly she went across to him and greeted him.

'And a very happy Christmas to you too, my dear.' He kissed her cheek. 'Please excuse an old man for being lazy and spending the morning in bed. Are you quite rested after your busy time and the unfortunate happening with the car last night?'

Toni assured him that she felt fine this morning.

'And is this your work?' He waved a hand round the hall. 'What a pleasant surprise for me, after being so disgracefully indolent, to come down and be greeted by such a delightful picture. It's a long, long time since the old place has looked like this at Christmas - not since my wife was still with me, and that's more than twenty years ago. She used to bring in green branches from the garden and hang up garlands as you have done. She said she was trying to make the hall look like a setting for *A Christmas Carol*. She loved Dickens.' His eyes were suddenly moist with the quick surge of emotion of the old. Then his gentle smile returned. 'But I mustn't be sad. I've been given

a wonderful, unexpected gift of happiness in having you and your mother here, and there's a very special bonus because your mother seems to enjoy taking charge of the cooking arrangements.'

'Oh yes, she's in her element, she loves cooking. She's enjoying every minute of it.'

'And I hope that you, too, are enjoying being here with us?'

'Yes, oh yes, of course I am,' she said, but she couldn't quite meet his eyes.

'Not unreservedly?' he said quietly.

She smiled quickly. 'Oh, please, you mustn't think that. Everything's absolutely wonderful.'

'Won't you tell me?' he insisted, still in the same quiet voice.

She put a hand to her cheek. 'It's nothing really, I expect I'm just being silly. It's only that Mr. Lawrence doesn't seem able to forgive me for - for reminding him—' She stopped, thinking that Benjamin too had loved Midge, but he seemed to cherish the resemblance, not resent it as Gray did.

Benjamin nodded. 'I thought that might be the trouble. Don't take it to heart, my dear child. I know Gray as if he were my own son. He's a strong man with a strong man's emotions and sometimes he may seem harsh and bitter. When a man like Gray sustains a shattering loss, it puts him out of tune with the world for a time. I believe he will find his true self again one day. I'm sure you'll find that his attitude will soften as time goes on.'

She nodded doubtfully. To her, Gray Lawrence seemed hard all through. 'I'll try not to notice if he seems to - to resent me. After all, it's only for a short time. I shan't be likely to see him again after Christmas.'

Benjamin was looking at her rather strangely. He seemed to be about to say something and then changed his mind.

'I expect he lives in London, to be near his work?' Toni said quickly. She had a horrid feeling that Benjamin was about to make some suggestion, some demand on her, that she didn't want to hear.

Benjamin sat down in one of the deep chairs beside the fire, and after a moment's hesitation, Toni took the chair opposite. He nodded across at her and smiled and she knew she had given him pleasure. What a responsibility, she thought, to have the power to make someone happy just by sitting down near them! It was quite frightening. But it was rewarding too, to be able to give so much pleasure to an old man who, although he had so much material wealth, had lost all the people he loved. She smiled back at him, feeling a warm rush of the pity that was said to be akin to love.

'Gray?' he was saying, in answer to her question. 'He has his flat in London and he travels round the world a good deal, of course. But his home is still here at Whiteways. He and Midge had their own quarters over in the other wing of the house. After she - left us, he kept it on, and I was grateful that he did. It would have been very lonely for me here, entirely on my own.' He looked round the hall, and up to the gallery above. 'This house was bought by my grandfather and I've lived here all my life. I suppose I should sell it, move to somewhere smaller, but it's not easy at my age. I love the old place, it's full of memories for me.'

She nodded sympathetically, and then she saw that he was feeling in an inside pocket of his velvet jacket. 'I hope you'll accept this little Christmas gift, Antonia. It's a very modest little piece, because I had the idea that anything more - spectacular might not please you at this point in time, but Warrens wouldn't be ashamed of it. I told our head craftsman, Joe Lattimer, about you, my dear, and he did the work himself and was as pleased and proud as a cat with two tails.'

She took the wrapping off to disclose a small leather box with a gilt letter W in one corner. Inside was an opal pendant on a slim gold band.

'Oh!' gasped Toni, fascinated by the beauty of the colours in the stone, an exquisite flame colour flecked with deep blue and a creamy, iridescent white. The setting was simple - a narrow frame of gold, following the natural

shape of the stone. 'It's the loveliest present I've ever had in my life,' she said simply. 'And my birthstone, too. How did you guess?'

Benjamin's grey eyes twinkled and she could almost imagine she saw her father sitting there. 'I have my spies,' he said. 'October the tenth, at Okehampton, wasn't it?'

'You went to the trouble of looking me up, just to - to—' She looked down at the opal pendant. 'Oh, thank you, thank you so much, dear Uncle Benjamin.'

'I'm relieved that you're pleased,' he said. 'I was a little scared of that family pride of yours.'

She shook her head, laughing, and said, 'I *would* be a muggins, wouldn't I, to let any silly pride deprive me of anything as beautiful as this.' Her eyes were sparking with mischief as she added, 'I take it as a tribute to my family connections.'

'No,' said Benjamin gently. 'As a tribute in your ownright.' He lifted his head, looking over Toni's shoulder, and said, 'Gray, come and look at this.'

Footsteps crossed the hall and he was standing just behind her chair. How long had he been there, and how much had he heard of the litde scene just past? She didn't look up; if she had seen the cynicism that she was sure must be in his face, all her pleasure in the gift would be spoiled. She placed the pendant carefully back in its leather box and laid it on the low table beside her chair. He could look at it if he wanted to, but she hoped he wouldn't.

Her eyes were an a level with the belt of his cord trousers. She saw his hand go out and pick up the box. 'H'm,' he said. 'A nice little piece. Marsha was right to suggest a band rather than a chain, don't you think? We might try something similar for Lady Reeves' daughter. I'll have a word with Marsha about it.'

He replaced the box on the table. 'Lucky Antonia!' he said casually. 'Do you like it?'



'Of course I like it. I love it,' She managed to keep her tone civil - just! Inside she was shaking with anger. In a few words he had deliberately reduced what he must have known to be a personal gift, chosen with care and a wish to please, to a cold business talking point. His patronizing words to her had been almost an insult. And who was Marsha?

Benjamin had no intention of discussing business. 'What about wines?' he asked Gray. 'Something excellent to drink with dinner - have you any ideas?'

Toni warmed to the old man. The abrupt change of conversation was not exactly a snub - Benjamin was much too courteous for that - but it indicated that he had not missed the subtle undercurrents that were flowing.

Gray walked over to the fireplace and leaned his back against the mellow old bricks. He thought for a moment or two and then suggested, 'How about a white Bordeaux? Barsac, perhaps?'

Benjamin shook his head. 'Ah no, we can drink Barsac at any time. This is a festive occasion. The Clicquot "3, I think, will you see to it? This is an occasion for champagne if ever I knew one.' He leaned forward and put his hand affectionately on Toni's arm, looking up at Gray. 'We have a very special guest today, my boy. We must see to it that she has a happy time, that she feels at home here with us, mustn't we?'

Toni glanced up and her eyes were caught and held. Gray was regarding her narrowly, meaningly. As plainly as if he had spoken the words he was saying to her, So you've been complaining already about my treatment of you? Just what I should have expected! But his voice was carefully polite as he replied, 'Certainly we must.'

Although he was replying to Benjamin his eyes were still on her and she found it impossible to look away. She could feel the blood stirring and a pulse throbbed in her throat. It was frightening the power this man had to disturb her. It was almost like falling in love must be, only she wasn't in love with him, she almost felt she hated him. And that in itself was disquieting, for she never remembered hating anyone before.

Gray looked back to Benjamin and as he withdrew his gaze from her she felt a weakness that was almost physical.

'I'll go down to the cellar and check up,' he said, and left them.

Toni blinked and looked across at Benjamin. 'You see how it is?' she said helplessly. 'There isn't any friendliness.'

The old man was polishing his monocle on a cream silk handkerchief. If he had hoped for a friendly response from Gray he might have looked disappointed. But he didn't look at all disappointed. On the contrary, he looked as if he were quite pleased about something. 'Friendship isn't the only way in which a man and a woman can respond to each other,' he said, and the twinkle was back in his eyes. 'It is enough, for a start, if they respond to each other at all.'

His meaning took a moment or two to sink in, and when it did she very nearly burst into wild laughter. Gray and herself! If that was the way Benjamin's mind was working it was too outrageous even to consider.

Suddenly Gray's own words came back to her: He's an excellent businessman but a born romantic. Well, she thought mutinously, he could stop brewing romantic notions about her! She didn't know it, but her back straightened, her grey eyes took on a clear, proud sparkle.

The old man was watching her with eyes that had once been as clear as her own. What they had lost in clarity over the years they had gained in understanding. Now, as he looked at Toni, he was encouraged by what he saw.

## CHAPTER FIVE

RATHER to her surprise, Toni found herself enjoying Christmas Day. Perhaps the fact that Gray didn't put in an appearance for lunch had something to do with it. Benjamin told them that Gray was going to try to persuade the local garage man to tow the car away for repairs. When he hadn't come back by one o'clock it was taken for granted that he was helping in the operation himself.

Without his disturbing presence lunch was a companionable meal. 'Just a snack,' Mrs. Warren announced, 'so that you don't spoil your appetite for dinner.'

She had made ham sandwiches and salad, mince pies and coffee, and they sat by the fire in the hall in the deep, chintzy chairs, with a low table drawn up between the three of them. Toni showed her mother the opal pendant and Mrs. Warren was thrilled and admiring. She herself was presented by Benjamin with an enormous box of sweetmeats with a Parisian name on the wrapper, and she produced a gift for him, from herself and Toni, half a dozen pure linen handkerchiefs. Knowing her mother, Toni guessed that she must have bought them as soon as Benjamin visited her in the flat and invited them here for Christmas. Mrs. Warren believed in dreams, but she also believed in doing some practical thing as a kind of hostage to fortune. Toni's smile in reply to Benjamin's thanks for the gift had a touch of wryness about it. She wondered if he guessed how much persuading she herself had needed before she finally agreed to come. Seeing him sitting here now, chatting to her mother, quietly content, she felt a twinge of guilt because she had only thought of her own feelings and hadn't tried to imagine the happiness it would bring to him to have some-one of his own family near him at Christmas time.

After lunch Benjamin suggested that they took a walk in the grounds. 'For the sake of our appetites,' he twinkled. The rain had stopped some time in the night and it was a cloudy, mild day.

This is my usual daily exercise when I am at home,' Benjamin said as the three of them strolled up the wide central walk of the rose garden and through an arch into an orchard and kitchen garden. 'Not a very lengthy

walk, but enough for my health. My domain is shrinking all the time. In my grandfather's day the farm was quite large, but for me my business in London has claimed most of my time until now, and much of the land here has been sold to men who could make it produce far more than I should have done.'

They skirted the park, where sheep grazed upon the green sappy grass between great trees, and ended up at the stables, to see the new foal. He lay stretched out asleep on the straw, as touching and appealing as all young creatures, his long spindly legs splayed out in contented abandonment. Near him his mother, a glossy small chestnut beauty, munched away placidly.

'A beautiful domestic picture they make, don't they?' smiled Benjamin as Mrs. Warren and Toni went into raptures over the foal. 'I couldn't resist breeding from Clementina.' He stroked the mare's sleek neck. 'A sentimental gesture, perhaps but she was my granddaughter's horse and it seemed a kind of continuity. Midge and Gray used to ride quite often - when she could persuade him to take time off from his work. This is Gray's horse - Lucifer. He's a high- spirited customer, but Gray has no difficulty in managing him.'

In the adjoining stall was a magnificent black horse, who looked every inch a Lucifer. When they approached he tossed his head and turned away, his nostrils flaring. Oh yes, a *very* suitable mount for the arrogant Gray Lawrence, Toni decided.

Benjamin tested the bolt on the bottom half of the stable door as if to reassure himself that Lucifer was not likely to charge out upon them, snorting in rage. He smiled wryly, and said, 'I like to assure myself that this gentleman is kept safely within bounds. I'm not a horseman myself. What about you, Antonia? Do you ride?'

'I used to, a little,' she told him. 'I had a school friend who was crazy about horses and her father paid for me to have lessons too, to keep Denise company. It was lucky for me, and I loved it, but when we left school Denise went off to university and of course the lessons stopped.'

He nodded. 'You must get into practice again. Gray's a splendid teacher, I'm sure he would like to take you out with him some time.'

He must be joking, Toni thought, and she looked up at him quickly and saw that he wasn't. Her mother was nodding, and smiling with pleasure. Toni would love that, wouldn't you, darling?"

Toni made a non-committal noise and moved away to have another look at the foal, and at that moment there was the sound of a car and Gray himself drove into the courtyard.

He swung out of the driving seat, slammed the door and came over to them. 'We're on the road again, you see,' he said. 'All dried out and running beautifully. Duncan's been a brick, but I'm afraid Mrs. Duncan's not loving me much for making her old man late for his Christmas dinner.'

Toni found herself gripping the stable door. It was quite absurd, but at this man's sudden appearance her heart had given a leap and begun to thump away unpleasantly. Everything had been so quiet, so peaceful in the old courtyard, and then he had to come, to shatter the tranquillity with his dynamic, disturbing masculinity.

Benjamin was saying, 'We've been taking a look at the horses, Gray. The new baby looks in good shape. By the way, Antonia rides and she'd enjoy going out with you, when Clementina is in form again.'

Toni saw, without looking directly, the dark head turn in her direction. 'Would you, Antonia? Enjoy going out with me?' To the other two his words must have sounded court-ous, if not particularly enthusiastic. To her they held undertones of sarcasm. 'I'd be thrilled,' she said sweetly, and saw his brows lift a fraction.

They strolled back towards the house and Toni was careful to walk with Benjamin. Behind them she could hear her mother chatting away to Gray, quite oblivious, apparently, to his lack of response. Or, if she did notice it, she would excuse and forgive because of the tragedy he had suffered. But I wouldn't, Toni thought fiercely. There's no excuse for his brand of arrogance. The best thing was to ignore him altogether, refuse to let him disturb her and get under her skin.

She'd have to work on it.

Christmas dinner was nearly over and Mrs. Warren's cheeks were flushed with pleasure at the compliments that her effort had produced. Even Toni, who knew all about her mother's cooking skill, had been impressed and, sitting in the place of honour on Benjamin's right, her faint tremor of nervousness had subsided as each mouth-watering course was carried in by Shirley and the other young girl, both looking very pleased and important. There hadn't really been any need to worry, she decided now. It had all turned out so different from anything she had imagined - so much more pleasant, more homely. No intimidating gathering of sophisticated visitors. No snooty butler, no waiters, no confusing array of cutlery. Just an ordinary Christmas dinner being eaten by an ordinary family. Well, not 'family' exactly. There was Dominic sitting next to her, and his sister Ann opposite, a pretty, dark girl with serious eyes, not a bit like her brother, but they were both so much at home here that they seemed like family. And not 'ordinary' exactly, either. Gray Lawrence, next to Ann, couldn't be counted 'ordinary' by any stretch of the imagination. But if you could ignore him, it was all very pleasant, decided Toni, feeling warm and a trifle hazy after two glasses of champagne.

She leaned back in her chair, trying to crack a walnut. She was wearing the midnight blue dress. The top was scooped out low, outlined with a ruched cuff of the georgette, and Benjamin's opal pendant was clasped round her neck. Candlelight from the massed candles in the two silver candelabra at either end of the centre flower arrangement fell softly on her white neck and shoulders, giving them a creamy seductiveness of which she was quite unconscious.

'Not like that, that's no way to do it.' Dominic's laughing voice was at her ear. He pulled his chair very close to hers, took the nutcrackers from her and split the walnut neatly down its centre.

'Very impressive!' She extracted one half and offered it to him. 'Like to go shares?'

He took the piece of nut, his hand lingering on hers. 'I'd like to go shares in more than this - with you, sweetheart,' he whispered wickedly.

'No! *Really?*' She smiled up at him. It was easy to flirt with Dominic, he was so like Adrian; he had the same light touch that lent a spice of fun to life. Not like some, she thought darkly, casting a fleeting glance towards Gray Lawrence, on the other side of the table. With a small shock she saw that he was watching her. She looked back to Dominic immediately, but that momentary contact with the strange, brooding, green-flecked eyes was enough to send a wriggle of unease through her. What was it about this man, for good-ness' sake, that had such a potent effect on her?

Her cheeks were suddenly burning, but perhaps nobody would «notice in the candlelight. She took a grip on herself and looked appreciatively at Ann, who was telling Benjamin about her art class at school. She seemed quite a bit older than Dominic - late twenties, possibly. Her face was thin and delicately boned and her large brown eyes had a sensitive, faintly sad expression. She wore a plain cream dress with a turnover collar and a double string of carved wooden beads.

'Your sister looks a nice person,' said Toni to Dominic.

He glanced across the table and nodded. 'She is. And not at all a bad cook either. She looks after me pretty well, considering that she has a job to run on the side.'

'You live alone, just the two of you?'

'Yes, since our parents died. You must come and see our *darling* little cottage. Too absolutely *twee!*' He pulled an absurd face. 'I think it was originally built for the pigman, when the farm here really was a farm and not a—' he glanced towards Benjamin, who was still talking to Ann '—well, I may as well say it, not a rich man's toy.'

'Is that what you think it is?'

'What else?' He lowered his voice still more. 'I'm supposed to be farm manager, but there's not much to manage.' He eased his shoulders back. 'I sometimes long to be doing a man-size job, something that really stretches me.'

'Then why don't you?' She wasn't all that interested, but it seemed friendly to ask.

'Maybe some day I will, when Ann's fixed up. I couldn't leave her on her own.'

'But couldn't she go along with you? She's a teacher, isn't she, and surely a teacher can get a job anywhere.'

He pursed his lips, shaking his head. 'The place I fancy is Australia and the wide open spaces. And Ann wouldn't want to emigrate. 'She has—' he paused, looking slightly awkward—she has certain - er - ties in this country.'

Toni guessed that he had said more than he had intended about his sister's affairs and she took the conversation back to safer ground. 'Australia's always a magnet to farmers. I had a boy-friend once who went out there to farm.'

'You did?' His interest kindled. 'And you didn't go out with him?'

She said wryly, 'He didn't ask me.'

Dominic looked disgusted. 'Stupid clot! Never mind, sweetheart, I'll ask you instead when I get around to going.'

'Yes, you do that, I'll hold you to it.' She laughed up at him and he gave her a quick, delighted hug.

On the other side of the table Gray turned abruptly to Mrs. Warren and said something, and she glanced round the table and then at Benjamin. 'Where shall we have coffee, Benjamin?'

'In the library, if everyone agrees,' he said. 'It's cosier there than in the drawing-room.'

Dominic whispered to Toni, 'The old man never goes into the drawing-room these days. I expect it's because Midge used to love sitting there. I think she



fancied it as a fitting background for her particular style. No trendy gear for Midge. She always looked as if she were off to Ascot, or a Hunt Ball or an evening at Glyndebourne. Always quite exquisite, was Midge.'

Toni glanced quickly at him. If a girl had said that about another girl, in that particular tone of voice, it would have sounded bitchy, but Dominic's expression was innocent of criticism.

Mrs. Warren stood up and Gray pulled back her chair. 'We'll leave you men to linger over your Madeira.' She beamed at Benjamin and disappeared to the kitchen to superintend the making of the coffee.

Toni and Ann went up to Toni's bedroom to tidy up. Ann sat herself on the stool in front of the dressing-table and opened her bag for a comb. 'Um, lovely meal/ she sighed. 'Heaven knows what it's done for my figure, but it was worth it. Your mother's a super cook, and I think she was a brick to take it all on at a moment's notice when poor old Ada was borne away to hospital. When I heard what had happened I had a horrid feeling that I ought to offer to cook the dinner, but I really didn't feel my skill was up to it. Especially as it was so important to Mr. Warren that everything should go right. Which it certainly did,' she added, 'thanks to your mother.' She combed back her silky dark hair and turned to Toni, who was drying her hands at the wash basin. 'How does it feel to be an heiress, out of the blue so to speak?'

'An heiress?' echoed Toni, stunned. 'Who on earth told you that?'

'Oh dear, have I spoken out of turn?' Ann was on her feet, looking contrite. 'I thought from what Dominic said that it was all fixed up that you were going to live here. I was thrilled when he told me. It seemed like a sort of fairy tale, something that doesn't happen much these days.' Just for a moment that very sad look touched her face and was quickly gone. 'I really am terribly sorry if I've spoken out of turn. It was unforgivable of me.' She sank down on to the stool again.

'Don't worry,' Toni said wryly, touched by the other girl's obvious self-reproach. 'It was a natural mistake, but it gave me a bit of a shock, just for the moment. You see, everything's, happened so quickly lately that I feel

a little dazed myself. I used to imagine that I was in control of things, that I could make decisions for myself, but now I'm - I'm not so sure.'

Ann nodded sympathetically. 'Yes, I know. If you're a woman you're apt to get carried away by your feelings, for all the talk about Women's Lib. Or am I out of date?' She grinned engagingly at Toni. Now, tell me you've forgiven me for putting my foot in it, and to prove it say you'll come and have coffee with me one day soon - before you go back to London.'

Toni was startled to find how very far away London seemed. 'Of course I will, I'd love to,' she said warmly, and found that she really meant it. It would be pleasant to have a friend again; she had missed her friends when she came to live in London and, moving from job to job as she had done, had never made new ones. Which made it rather strange that it never entered her mind that, when this Christmas visit was over, she was hardly likely to see Ann again. 'When would suit you?' she asked.

'Tomorrow morning?'

'Lovely. I'll look forward to that.' So it was arranged, and as they went downstairs again there was no warning in Toni's mind that by tomorrow morning the whole course of her life would be changed, that she would be even less in control of it than she had imagined.

The men were already in the library when they got there, and Mrs. Warren was dispensing coffee from an outsize Cona on a side table. Benjamin smiled at Toni from the depths of a leather armchair as she took him his coffee, and again she thought he looked older and frailer than when she had first seen him in London, only a couple of weeks ago. But he seemed content as he sat there, slowly turning over the pages of the snapshot album that Mrs. Warren had brought with her. Toni sat on the rug at this feet, interpreting the older snapshots to him, some of them taken before she was born, many of them with her father in them.

Dominic drank his coffee and said he must go out to the stables to check that the new foal was all right.

Ann, sitting with Gray on a settee in the window alcove, said, 'Oh, may I come? I haven't seen the foal yet.' Gray got up to accompany them and Dominic cast a glance of invitation towards Toni, but Benjamin put a hand over hers. 'Antonia will stay and keep an old man company, won't you, my dear?'

'Of course I will,' she said immediately, and looked up in time to catch the sardonic gleam in Gray's eyes as he went out of the room. She felt almost sorry for him. It must be dreadful to be so cynical that you felt compelled to interpret everyone's motives - even her own very real motive of giving Benjamin pleasure - as being self-seeking and calculating. She would give a lot to prove him wrong, she thought, to show him that she wasn't that sort of girl at all.

Mrs. Warren pulled the silken bell-cord to summon Shirley, and, when she arrived, accompanied her back to the kitchen to superintend the clearing up process.

'Your mother's a marvel,' Benjamin sighed. 'And she really seems to enjoy it all.'

'She does,' Toni told him. 'She's always called herself a happy Martha.'

'I admire Marthas. Where would the world be without them?' Benjamin was silent for a while, gazing into the fire, where apple logs flowed just as they did in the hall. 'She has been the practical one who has made possible one of the happiest days I remember. I just hope that there will be time left to me for more happy days, now that I have found myself a family once more, when I imagined I was alone.'

He took out his monocle and swung it slowly to and fro on its black ribbon.

Toy know what I'm trying to say, don't you, my dear? You came into my life and it was a kind of miracle. I'm asking you to stay, Antonia, not as an occasional visitor but as an integral part of everything I have and am. I'm asking you not to break the link again but to strengthen it. There would be all sorts of details to arrange, but they would fall into place if you say Yes. Naturally, your mother would enter into all this in any way she wished.

Finally, my dear, I want to make it plain that I'm not asking you to step into the shoes of anybody else, to be a substitute. I'm asking you for your own sake, because already I feel I know you, and love you. There, I've said my say. I won't try to influence you or hold out tempting inducements. I'm sure none of that would help my case, because I know you have a Warren's pride. I could almost wish that I didn't have this world's goods in such plenty; I feel that I should have a better chance with you if I had less of them. But where the heart is involved, material things should not really matter, and I hope with all my heart that you won't leave me.'

He was leaning forward in his chair and now, as he let the monocle go, it swung on its ribbon before settling against the burgundy velvet jacket. Toni's eyes followed it. She was conscious of Benjamin watching her steadily, patiently. She knew now that she had expected this, although not so soon, perhaps. Although she hadn't put it into words, she had known that she would have this decision to make. It was a clear-cut choice. On the one hand money, position, importance, all handed to her on a plate. On the other hand independence, the satisfaction of knowing that what she had, she had earned for herself. She knew that Miss Black thought quite highly of her. With hard work she could rise to some worthwhile position - personal secretary, or even higher. The words of the song floated into her mind'... and what is more, I've done it *my way*.'

'I'm not expecting an answer now,' Benjamin said gently. 'Just think it over.'

'Oh, of course I will,' she said, and her eyes were moist. 'It's a wonderful, generous offer and I'm a stupid little fool not to jump at it, but—'

'You are certainly *not* a stupid little fool, Antonia, and I don't like to hear you say it.' He raised his hand, cutting her off in mid-sentence, and for the first time she saw the other side of the gentle, courteous old man - the side that was a keen business executive, head of a great concern. What had Gray Lawrence said to her? 'He's an excellent businessman but a born romantic.' And why did she have to think about Gray Lawrence at this moment?

Benjamin was still watching her. He put a hand on her shoulder now and said, 'Don't *worry*, Antonia. Just let the idea sink in and then come and tell me what happens. Whatever you decide will be all right with me.'

The others came back then and the talk became general. There seemed to be a tacit understanding between the young people that their activities should be geared to something that Benjamin would enjoy. Gray brought a record player from his own part of the house and put on Benjamin's favourite Mozart symphony. Afterwards he suggested Scrabble, which turned out to be the one game that Benjamin enjoyed playing. There was lazy, quiet talk, and Gray led Benjamin on to tell one or two wryly witty stories about his travels in far-off places. Benjamin was enjoying himself, there was no doubt about that, and when at nearly eleven o'clock he got to his feet and announced that it was past his bedtime and that he wanted to thank them all for making it a very splendid Christmas indeed, there was no doubt that he meant every word of it.

Mrs. Warren, who had been gamely stifling her yawns for some time past, said, 'I shall go up too. We'll leave the young people to continue the festivities in their own way, shall we, Benjamin? Would you like me to bring you up a hot drink?' She smiled happily at the old man and they said their good nights and went out together, chatting companionably.

When they had gone Gray sat down beside Ann on the settee. They had been sitting there most of the evening and from time to time Toni had noticed them talking together, noticed how they looked at each other. With Ann, Gray was a different person from the man that she herself had so far encountered. There was no cynicism or mockery in his smile. He was easy and relaxed and when, now and then, she said something that made him laugh, his laughter was genuine and spontaneous. Toni saw him smile at Ann now as he lowered himself beside her and stretched out his long legs lazily, and she looked away quickly. She had wondered how he would act with a girl he liked and admired, hadn't she? Well, now she knew.

Dominic came over and perched on the arm of Toni's chair. 'Well, what *do* the young people do now?' he inquired. 'Whoop it up and have a party?'

His sister pulled a face at him. 'Oh, no, Nicky. We've had a lovely, peaceful old-fashioned Christmas. Let's leave it at that and not start trying to give it a party flavour. Don't you agree, Gray?'

Gray smiled at her from the corner of the settee. 'Absolutely. Parties aren't much in my line. But shouldn't we consult Antonia's wishes?' His eyes narrowed and slid to Toni, sweeping over her almost contemptuously. 'We *must* consider our honoured guest, musn't we?' he drawled.

There was a short, uncomfortable silence in the room. Then Ann laughed and said, 'Gray, your humour *is* inclined to be a trifle black, don't you think?'

But Toni, meeting Gray's insolent gaze across the room, knew that it had been no sort of humour, black or any other colour. His words had been deliberately insulting. He had intended to hurt her and make her feel an outsider.

She felt her eyes held by that penetrating, challenging gaze and could not look away, and in that moment fury boiled up inside Toni, an emotion stronger and more primitive than she had ever felt in her life before. She wanted to tear across the room, to slap his face, to claw that cynical smile from his mouth, to fight him with her bare hands until - until - her imagination faltered. She saw Ann looking at her rather oddly and struggled for control. When she spoke it was like hearing someone else's voice. 'I don't think I really rate special consideration as a guest,' she said. 'Perhaps I should tell you all that Mr. Warren - that Uncle Benjamin - has asked me to make Whiteways my home, to be his "family", as he likes to call it. And I've agreed.'

Afterwards Toni could never remember exactly what the effect of her announcement had been. She knew that Ann had kissed her and said she was glad, that Dominic had made some slightly facetious remark about brightening up the old house. What Gray Lawrence said - if he said anything at all - she neither knew nor cared. He had forced her into making a defiant, somewhat dramatic gesture. She had never thought she was impulsive, yet this man had the power to make her act out of character, to turn her world upside down. It was humiliating and she hated him for it. But she had scored a small triumph. He hadn't wanted her in his life, he had made that perfectly plain. He had tried to make everything as difficult and uncomfortable for her as he could, no doubt hoping that she would be frightened off and at least she had the satisfaction of knowing that he would have to put up with her being here, of seeing her about the place occasionally, although he would no doubt

avoid her as far as possible. He must, she thought with satisfaction, be feeling livid.

But if he was angry there was no visible sign of it as he got up and strolled to the side table. 'This calls for a toast. Ann, Dominic, will you drink with me to Antonia?' He poured out drinks and lifted his glass and the other two followed suit. 'To Miss Antonia Warren - of Warrens,' he said.

'Thank you,' said Toni, proud of the calmness of her voice. 'And now I should like to propose a toast. To Benjamin Warren, the kindest man I know.'

The toast was duly honoured and Ann put down her glass and said, with satisfaction, 'Well, that's settled. And I'm thrilled, Antonia. I'm sure you've done the right thing; it will mean such a lot to old Mr. Warren. And another nice thing is that we're going to be neighbours,' she added warmly.

Toni smiled at Ann, liking her. If Gray were going to settle for this girl, she thought, he'd be lucky and perhaps she might humanize him. 'Thank you, Ann,' she said. 'And my friends call me Toni,' she added.

'Good,' Dominic put in. 'Then I will. Toni - Toni - yes, I like the name. It's got class. Like its owner,' he added wickedly. 'And now, the night is young and I still think we ought to have a celebration party. How about it?'

'Not for me, Nicky,' said Ann definitely. 'I'm asleep on my feet.'

'Oh well—' Dominic shrugged, relinquishing the idea reluctantly. 'We'll celebrate another time, shall we, Toni?' He moved close to her. 'How about having dinner with me soon? Later this week?'

Before she could reply Gray cut it, 'I shouldn't bank on it.'

Dominic's head jerked up and his chin jutted aggressively. 'I wasn't inviting you, friend,' he said evenly and deliberately and the antagonism between the two men was almost tangible.

How beastly to end up Christmas Day on a note like this, thought Toni, and she gave Dominic her most charming smile and said, 'Thank you for asking me and I'd love to come, but do you mind if we leave it for a few days? There's going to be quite a bit to arrange. I'll see you around, won't I?'

'Sure you will,' Dominic said fervently. 'O.K., Ann, we'll go now ...'

Gray opened the front door for them and Ann said, 'I'll see you tomorrow morning, then, Toni. About eleven? But don't bother if you can't make it. I'll quite understand. If you find you *can* manage it, our cottage is just over there—' she waved a hand into the darkness '—down the lawn and through the kitchen garden. You can't miss it, it's got a little stone dragon over the front porch.' She linked her arm with her brother's and they both called good-bye from the bottom of the steps and disappeared into the night.

Toni turned from the door hoping that Gray would take himself off too; she didn't want to cross any more swords this evening. But he made no move to go. He stood there looking down at her, tall and straight and rather overpowering and - she had to admit it in all fairness - devastatingly good-looking in his dark suit, with the white linen at neck and wrists emphasizing the brown of his skin.

'Well, well, so you've pulled it off with Benjamin already!' he said, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets and nodding judicially. 'You certainly haven't wasted much time. A good little opportunist, aren't you, Miss Warren?'

The hall was dimly lit and his face was in shadow, but she could well imagine the mocking look in those greenish, flecked eyes. He was standing far too close for her peace of mind, and in some strange way the fact that she disliked the man so much made her all the more physically aware of him. 'I don't think you and I have anything to say to each other, Mr. Lawrence,' she said coldly, and would have swept past him to the stairs, but he put out an arm and barred her way.

'On the contrary,' he said mildly, 'I think we have several things to say to each other. As your friend Dominic remarked, the night is still young. I'm sure you wouldn't want to go to your lonely bed yet.' He put the faintest



emphasis on the word 'lonely' and in spite of herself she felt her heartbeat increase. The man was absolutely insufferable!

He put a hand at her elbow. 'Come on, I can see you're just yearning to tear me to ribbons. Let's sit down and pretend we like each other, and have a companionable drink, shall we?'

She found herself back in the study, hardly knowing how she had got there, and uncomfortably conscious of the hard grip of his hand on her bare arm. He gave her a little push into the deep leather settee by the fire, in which the logs were still glowing dull red. 'What shall it be? I can recommend Benjamin's brandy as a nightcap.'

'No, *please*,' she said hastily. 'Nothing at all. I've had quite enough to drink this evening.' More than enough, she thought anxiously, because her head felt light and uncomfortably swimmy. He slanted a glance towards her as he selected two glasses from the side-table. 'Still afraid of me?' he inquired. 'Or—' he added mockingly—'of yourself?'

She considered that remark not worthy of a reply - even if she could have thought of one - so she sat as stiff and upright as she could in the deep settee, the skirt of her midnight blue dress clinging silkily round her ankles, fixed her gaze on the fire, and said nothing.

He set a glass on the table beside her. 'That won't impair your fighting spirit, I promise you. And now, if you're determined to have a battle, let's be cosy about it.' He switched on a crimson-shaded standard lamp, switched off the main light, and came and sat down beside her, stretching out his long legs with a sigh of content. 'Quite the best part of the day - in suitable company,' he smiled. 'Now then - shoot!'

Oh, but he was clever! He was playing her like a fish on a line. A few minutes ago, in hot blood, she could have flayed him with her anger; she had had the words on the tip of her tongue. But now she couldn't remember them. She took a tiny sip from the glass, to bolster her courage. 'I simply wanted to say that I - I resent your interference,' was all she could manage.

His eyebrows went up lazily. 'Interference? Between you and the estimable Dominic? Not at all. I merely reminded you, as you said later yourself, that you were likely to be very busy in the immediate future.'

That wasn't how it sounded to me,' she said, regaining some of her courage.

'No? How did it sound to you, then?'

'It sounded,' said Toni, 'as if you were being abominably overbearing. And I'd like you to know, Mr. Lawrence, that I please myself in choosing my friends and I've no intention of asking your advice about who I go out with.'

'I'm sure you haven't,' he said smoothly. 'I've seldom encountered a more stubborn and headstrong young woman.'

'Oh, so I'm stubborn and headstrong now, as well as oppor - oppor—' Humiliatingly she stumbled over the unfamiliar word.

'Opportunist,' he supplied blandly. 'But you shouldn't take that as an insult. Some of my best friends and business acquaintances are splendid opportunists. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that you don't get very far in business without more than a slight tinge of the quality. Applied to your sex it may sometimes seem less than complimentary, I agree. I'm sorry if you took it amiss,' he added cheerfully.

She threw him a glance of pure hatred. 'Don't trouble to apologize,' she said carefully. 'I'm not really in the least concerned with your opinion of me.'

'Aren't you?' he asked softly. 'Aren't you really, Antonia?' His arm reached out and she shrank a fraction further into her corner of the settee, but he merely picked up his drink from the table.

He held the glass between his hands, his eyes narrowed as they met hers over the top of it. 'But you must admit that your whole ploy has been very skilful in its grasping of the right time and circumstances. You can't really blame me for thinking of it as opportunism.'

She lifted her head higher. 'I suppose,' she said, as cuttingly as she could, 'it would never occur to you that my motives might be not at all what you seem to think - that I might have acted out of - of consideration for other people's feelings?'

He lounged back, his eyes half closed. 'Meaning - whose?'

'Uncle Benjamin's, principally. He really seems to want me. And there's my mother, too. She hasn't had an easy life. I should like to make something up to her for all she's given to me.'

'Beautiful unselfish motives!' he drawled.

'Why not? It's not unknown for people to be unselfish.'

'It is to me,' he stated flatly. 'We're all selfish.'

'What a beastly, cynical attitude!' she said hotly. She was all the angrier because at the moment she wasn't at all sure what her motives actually were. She only knew that they were too complex to disentangle.

'Yes, isn't it?' he agreed. 'But then I'm a beastly, cynical man. I should have thought you'd have discovered that by now.'

'I have,' she said shortly. She turned her head away and her heavy, russet-gold hair swung back into the curve of her neck.

The silence that followed her words seemed vaguely menacing. She wondered what he would do if she got up and made for the door, but her legs felt distinctly odd and it would be intolerable if she made a fool of herself. She wished she had refused the liqueur with coffee, and the glass of Benjamin's favourite Madeira, which he had insisted on them all sampling later in the evening.

Gray's voice broke the tension. 'You're very lovely, Toni,' he said softly. 'But of course you know that, don't you?'

She turned her head and saw the speculation in his eyes. This time there was no possibility of mistaking the message in them. Her throat constricted and her breath came shallowly and unevenly. She dragged her eyes away from that disturbing gaze, and looked down at his hand, resting on the settee between them, the brown sensitive fingers only inches from where the silky stuff of her dress clung smoothly over her knees and fell, foaming, to the floor.

Suddenly his facade of cool cynicism cracked. His face was dark with anger and his voice ragged with emotion. 'Why the devil did you have to come here to torment me?'

They looked at each other in the dim light. Then his hand moved, stretched towards her, his fingers buried themselves in her hair and moulded to the shape of her neck. Her body didn't seem under her control any longer and when he moved closer and drew her into his arms she knew, in a hazy way, that this was what she had been longing for ever since the moment he had kissed her in the car, with the flood water all round them.

His face was very near hers, but in the dim light she couldn't see if there was any tenderness in it; she couldn't believe that there was. When his mouth found hers there was no tenderness either. His lips were hard and demanding. He needed no response from her, all he wanted was to take, take, take, and she was helpless, carried on the tide of his need and his passion.

Then, across the room, the telephone rang. Gray's head went back, his arms were still as he waited for it to stop, but it went on and on, interminably, shrilling through the quiet old house. At last the ringing ceased and Gray let out his breath and muttered something, but Toni didn't hear what he said, for, almost before it had stopped, the ringing began again.

She heard what Gray said then, all right. He shot out the words in no uncertain manner as he got up and strode across the room. 'Yes?' he barked into the mouthpiece. 'Who?' He looked over at Toni and shrugged, motioning to her to stay where she was. 'Who?' he said again, 'I can't hear, the line's bad. Oh, Marsha! It's you, is it? My dear girl, what a time <sup>x</sup> to choose to phone. Yes, I know I said - but we're in the country here, you

know, early hours and so on - everyone goes to bed at a reasonable time. What?' He laughed. 'No, of course I wasn't—'

His back was turned from Toni. Very quietly she got up and crept out of the room. In the hall she paused for a moment, her mouth dry, her heart thumping, and then she ran upstairs to her room as if she were pursued by the devil himself.

For a long time she made no attempt to get into bed. She sat on the edge of it, still trembling inside, and tried to calm down and get into some sort of perspective the happenings of this extraordinary day. But very soon she realized that the thinking part of her was not functioning very well, while the feeling part was working overtime. That, of course, was Gray Lawrence's fault. Although Toni was inexperienced, she realized that he had a physical attraction that surrounded him like a strong magnetic field, so powerful that any woman would have difficulty in resisting him if he chose to turn the power in her direction.

She had no illusions about his feeling for her - if you could call it feeling, she thought grimly. It was clear that he had loved his wife passionately, and that she herself was sufficiently like Midge to attract him, almost against his will. It was an unhappy, unrewarding situation and she wanted none of it. Not in her sane moments she didn't, but the moments in the study just now had certainly not been notable for sanity. The situation was intolerable, she decided, her hands clenched tensely on the silk bedspread. Intolerable - and yet she had accepted Benjamin's suggestion that she should make her home with him, thus making it inevitable that she would see more of Gray Lawrence than was wise or safe. *Had* her motives been purely unselfish, as she had declared so smugly to Gray? She didn't know. Motives were baffling things and it was a waste of time trying to get to the bottom of them.

She sighed deeply and got up and washed her face and cleaned her teeth. Things would sort themselves out. The thing was decided now and she couldn't change her mind, even though Benjamin didn't yet know of her decision. She would tell him as soon as possible tomorrow. It would be unbearable if he heard of her decision from Gray, not from herself.

She slipped off her clothes and got into the luxurious bed and looked round the luxurious room. Any girl would be an idiot to turn down the chance of living in such surroundings, wouldn't she? Then why was she allowing Gray Lawrence's opinion to weigh with her in the slightest degree? Anyway, when the holiday was over he would no doubt be in London most of time. When he was here he would get accustomed to seeing her around the place, and her likeness to Midge would cease to affect him.

There were plenty of other girls for him. There was Ann, who had laughed with him and teased him; it had been quite plain that they knew each other well and liked each other a lot. Then there was this Marsha person, who had rung him up late enough to suggest that she was an intimate friend. That was just two, and there were no doubt plenty more who were ready to fall for his charms. She just had to be very careful that she wasn't one of them, that was all. When the time came, she would love, and be loved, as herself - Antonia Warren - and not as a second-best substitute for someone else.

## CHAPTER SIX

IN spite of her common sense in summing up the situation, and in spite of the softness of her bed, Toni slept fitfully and was up and dressed very early next morning. She found her mother in the kitchen, busy preparing breakfast.

'Good morning, love. I didn't expect to see you down yet. I thought you young things would keep it up late last night, and you'd have a good lie-in today. I told Shirley and Mavis they needn't come until ten this morning. They're such nice, cheerful girls and they worked so hard yesterday evening, getting everything washed up and left nice and tidy. They're just coming in for an hour or so today and then they're going off home to have another Christmas dinner. Are you hungry, Toni? You and I can have breakfast here, can't we? I'll put Benjamin's on a tray. He likes his breakfast quite early, he says. He doesn't sleep very well, apparently.'

She chattered away happily, hurrying about the big modern kitchen as if she had worked in it all her life. 'There's just the three of us for breakfast. Mr. Lawrence looks after himself; he has his own private part of the house. But of course you knew that, didn't you?' She took three large brown eggs out of the fridge.

Toni arranged plates and cutlery that her mother had put on the kitchen table. 'You're having rather a busman's holiday, aren't you, Mother? It's not turning out a very restful Christmas for you.'

Mrs. Warren cut slices of bread for toast. 'I'm loving it, I am really, Toni. I'd rather be busy than just sitting around, you know that. And it's a dream, having a kitchen like this to work in after—' she hesitated '—well, after having smaller kitchens.'

Toni glanced round the big, light room with all its gleaming equipment, mentally comparing it with the glorified cupboard they called a kitchenette in Hornsey, and the poky little built-on annexe to the cottage in Devon. Her mother had never complained about the humble surroundings she had always had to put up with, and she wouldn't begin now. But Toni felt a warm rush of satisfaction that life would be better for her now.

She picked up the toast-rack and looked at it. 'How would you feel about staying on here, Mum? For good.'

Mrs. Warren stared at her, the breadknife arrested in mid-air. 'Staying *here*? she repeated stupidly.

Toni nodded. Uncle Benjamin asked me yesterday evening if we would make our home with him.'

'And—' her mother swallowed '—and you agreed?'

'It is a bit of a shock, isn't it?' Toni smiled. 'Me, with my nasty sticky pride! But I did. Or rather, I'm going to tell him that I agree at the first opportunity^ That's if *you're* happy about it, too, Mum.'

'I'm - I'm—' Mrs. Warren sank into one of the kitchen chairs and burst into tears. Toni never remembered seeing her mother cry before, even when things were at their most difficult, and at that moment she realized for the first time in her life that sudden fulfilment can be as shattering as sudden disappointment.

'I'm sorry, dear,' her mother said at last, wiping her eyes. 'It was too much for me, all at once. But I always knew that something good would happen one day if I went on hoping and believing.'

Toni grinned wryly. 'You did rather more than hope and believe, though. You gave events quite a hefty shove when you came to Warren's and delivered that letter on the day I had my interview.'

Her mother looked up anxiously. 'You're not still blaming me for that, are you, dear? I wanted a good life for you, Toni, something better than slaving away in dingy offices.'

'Yes, I know, and of course I'm not blaming you. In the end I had to make my own decision. It's just that at the moment it all seems like a fairy story, and I'm not sure that I'm the type to play Cinderella. Anyway, I'm too old for fairy stories.'



Her mother looked shocked. 'Never, Toni, you're never too old to believe in fairy stories, they hold some of the deepest truths in the world.' Then she smiled and touched her daughter's bright hair. 'You make the loveliest Cinderella, and one day some Prince Charming will think so too.'

It was no good arguing with Mrs. Warren in one of her fey moods, so Toni merely pulled a sceptical face and changed the subject. 'Look, Mother, I don't want to bother Uncle Benjamin so early in the day, but I want to let him know that I've made up my mind. Do you think, if I wrote a little note and put it on his breakfast tray—?'

So while Mrs. Warren made toast and boiled eggs Toni went off to the study to look for pen and paper. The room was just as she had left it last night. There was a faint smell of cigars, and the glasses still stood where they had been put down. The velvet settee cushions were flattened and indented. The heat rose into Toni's cheeks as she remembered exactly how they had got that way, and it was a kind of release to pummel them back into shape. She turned abruptly away from the settee to find writing paper at the desk.

*'Dear Uncle Benjamin,' she wrote.*

*'If you still want me the answer is Yes.*

*'With gratitude and affection, 'Antonia.'*

She licked the envelope and thumped it down with her fist.

There, it was done! And as for you, Mr. Gray Lawrence, she thought irrelevantly, you can think what you like of me. As if I cared!

She got up and stalked to the door, without so much as another glance in the direction of the settee.

At eleven o'clock Toni made her way along the central path in the long lawn, and through the archway in the tall beech hedge at the end of it. At the far end of the kitchen garden, nearly hidden by fruit trees, she saw the cottage with the small dragon over the front door, and Ann herself coming to meet her.

'I'm so glad you could make it. Come along in, I've got coffee all ready. Dominic's across at the stables. He said he'd try to get back for coffee, but he wasn't sure.' She showed Toni into the sitting-room, which was tiny, full of the scent of hyacinths, and with a bright fire burning.

Toni sat down, taking the cup of coffee Ann handed to her, and looked round appreciatively. 'Nice,' she said. 'Very cosy.'

Ann took the chair on the other side of the fireplace. She was wearing a tweed skirt today, with a hand-knitted white pullover, and she looked rather beautiful with her delicately sculptured features and her enormous brown eyes. Toni wondered again if there was anything between her and Gray Lawrence. There would be nothing at all about this girl to remind him of Midge, nothing to make him treat Ann with the bitter, frustrated hostility that he showed to her. With Ann it would be like starting all over again, which would surely be what he wanted - if he contemplated another marriage at all.

Ann was laughing her friendly laugh. 'A little too cosy really; in fact, decidedly cramped at times. I'm sure poor Nicky often feels hemmed in here. But it won't be for always. Things change. Meanwhile we can manage, so long as we don't invite too many people at once. And Mr. Warren has been so good; he extended the kitchen and fitted it all up for me. It's quite super - you must see it before you go. He really is a dear, isn't he?'

'Yes, he is,' Toni said, remembering how truly delighted he had seemed about her decision. She had gone up to his room, at his request, to find him sitting up in a great four-poster bed, looking more distinguished than ever in a black dressing-gown with gold braid, his white hair and beard as immaculate as if he were about to attend some formal function. But there had been nothing formal about his pleasure as he had taken her hands between his and said, 'I'm so glad, Antonia. So very glad. We must see that you don't regret your choice.'

Toni had mentioned to him that Ann had invited her for coffee, and had asked if it would be all right for her to go, or, if Benjamin had other plans for her, and he had laughed and patted her cheek. 'My dear child,' he had said, 'I want you to do what *you* want. When you have had time to get used to this

new situation you may find that there is some special thing you are interested in, some particular way of expressing your talents. When you do you must come and tell me and it will give me the greatest satisfaction to provide anything you wish for. Just so long as you don't request the Koh-i-Noor diamond,' he had added with a twinkle.

'I'm afraid you're determined to spoil me,' Toni told him rather seriously, for she had distinct misgivings on this point. 'I'm accustomed to working for my keep, you know.'

But Benjamin wasn't to be deflated. 'If work is what you fancy there won't be any problem there. How would you take to the idea of learning the family business?'

The family business! Put like that it sounded so small, so insignificant. If she hadn't known that Warrens was one of the most important jewellery firms in the country; if she hadn't seen the fabulous Bond Street showrooms; then she would have jumped at the idea. But - 'You mean going to London? You would find me a job there?' In spite of herself she sounded faintly awed.

Benjamin's twinkle had become brighter. 'You *were* applying for a job, I seem to remember.'

'Yes, of course, but that was different,' Toni said rather timidly.

'Very different indeed,' smiled Benjamin. 'Miss Antonia Warren will no longer be a slave to a typewriter. No, my dear, I was thinking of something far more interesting. It would give me the greatest satisfaction to teach you what I know of precious stones, of settings and designs, of all the craftsmanship that goes to make the thing of beauty that is a joy for ever. Would that appeal to you?'

Toni's eyes were shining. 'It would be thrilling, if you think I'd be able to take it all in.'

The old man's eyes had studied her face for what seemed a long time, and there was a new expression in them. It might have been regret, a half-puzzled regret. 'I'm sure you would, Antonia,' he had said.

Now, looking at Ann across the coffee table, she said again, 'Yes, Benjamin is a dear. He's so - so benevolent and generous. A bit like one of those Dickens characters who only exist to make people happy.' She paused. 'I just wonder—'

Ann waited in silence and after a moment Toni gave a half-embarrassed little laugh and went on, 'I just wonder whether it's good for anybody to feel they can have anything they ask for.'

'That's a point most of us wouldn't even question if the chance came our way,' Ann said with a smile. 'But I know what you mean. I think some people are spoilsable and other people couldn't be spoiled, no matter how much they were given. Don't you think that there are two kinds of folk - the givers and the takers? You can't spoil a giver because he's basically unselfish. But a taker is never satisfied. The more he gets the more he wants. Goodness, I *am* getting deep, so early in the morning! Gray would be disgusted with me; he's always accusing me of taking everything too seriously.' The soft brown eyes clouded for a moment. 'Poor Gray!'

There were several responses that Toni could have made to that, but she sipped her coffee and made none of them. Everyone, it seemed, pitied Gray and made allowances for him. Everyone, that was, except her. She didn't think he was the kind of man who would tolerate pity, and certainly she didn't feel like making allowances for his attitude towards her.

She wasn't aware of how her head had lifted proudly, and her small jaw had firmed, until Ann said, rather tentatively, 'Don't let Gray spoil things for you, Toni. He can be pretty unbearable when he feels like it, and I could see last night that he was getting under your skin.'

'He hates me for being like his wife,' Toni said. It was the truth but, put baldly into words, it sounded as if she was dreadfully upset about it, which of course she wasn't, was she?

She tried to soften the bleak statement. 'I suppose you can understand how he feels when he sees me around the place. He must have loved his wife very much.'

Ann was looking at her rather oddly. 'Yes, I think he did,' she said.

After that there didn't seem to be anything more to say on the subject and Toni was relieved when the conversation turned to less personal matters. It was distinctly awkward to have drifted into talking like this with the girl that Gray might be going to marry.

Ann didn't seem at all embarrassed, though, and chatted about the village nearby, and the small market town about five miles away, where she did her shopping and taught at the primary school.

'I'm beginning to feel almost at home already,' Toni told her. 'I was brought up in a village myself and I expect one village is very like another. I'm sure I'll find plenty to do.' But as soon as she had said that she began to wonder if it was true. All her life up to now there had been some goal ahead that she was working towards: school exams, secretarial training, later on her work in London that was going to lead, she hoped, to more responsible, interesting jobs. Would it be enough just to have a life of leisure? She could help her mother here and there, possibly, but she guessed that it would prove difficult to take any of the housekeeping work out of her mother's capable hands. There was Benjamin's offer to teach her about the jewellery business, but she couldn't spend all her time on that, fascinating though it would be.

She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. 'Goodness, I must go, or I'll be late for lunch.' •

'Dominic will be disappointed he's missed you,' Ann said. 'I expect something turned up that he had to attend to - it usually does on a farm.' She glanced out of the window. 'Did you notice that it had come on to rain again? It's simply pouring down. Did you bring a mac or anything? Well, look, take mine, I shan't be needing it and Dominic can come over to the house and pick it up later on.'

She went out of the room and came back with a scarlet mac with a hood, which Toni began gratefully to pull over her not-very-thick slacks and sweater.

Ann looked doubtfully at her sandals. 'It's well to see *you've* grown out of your country ways,' she laughed. 'Hang on a minute and I'll get you my overshoes from the kitchen. Not very elegant but extremely useful.'

Toni buttoned up the red mac and pulled the hood over her hair, turning to the mirror over the sideboard at the back of the room. She could hear Ann rummaging about at the back of the cottage. 'Don't bother if you can't find them,' she called.

At that moment the front door of the cottage, which led straight into the sitting-room, opened, letting in a cold gust of wind and rain, and before she could turn round Toni found herself caught in a tight hug from behind by two strong arms, while a man's voice said, 'Sweetheart - I've been counting the minutes to get away. I thought I'd never make it,' in a tone so urgent, so patently that of an impatient lover, that Toni's mind went quite blank. Dominic was taking an awful lot for granted, was her first quick thought, and she would have to tell him that—

She twisted round in the arms that held her and saw, out of focus, a demanding mouth only inches from her own. It approached purposefully, then stopped and drew back. The arms that held her fell away and she found herself staring at a complete stranger, a man with fair hair and a thin, intellectual face.

Toni turned to the door and saw Ann standing there, a pair of plastic overshoes in her hand, her eyes wide and startled. She must have witnessed part, at least, of what had just happened. She and the fair man stared at each other in helpless dismay. Then he said, 'How the hell was I to know there were *two* Red Riding Hoods?' He glanced towards Toni and added, 'My apologies.' Then, abruptly, he turned to the window and stood with his back to them, his hands stuck deep into his pockets.

Ann took charge of the situation. Dropping the overshoes, she walked over to the man at the window and put a hand on his arm. 'Toni, this is Keith Hemsley, who teaches art at my school,' she said calmly. 'Toni is Mr. Warren's niece, Keith, I told you about her.'

The fair man turned reluctantly. He looked very pale, and it was obvious that he was more upset about what had happened than seemed called for by an understandable, if embarrassing, mistake. He and Toni acknowledged the introduction briefly, then he shrugged and said-, 'It's over to you, Ann. I'm completely out of my depth. My own stupid fault, of course, but I saw Dominic in the distance as I came along, and I took it for granted you'd be on your own.' He threw "himself moodily into one of the fireside chairs.

Ann said calmly, 'There's no need to worry, Keith. Toni's one of us, I'm sure of that.' She turned to Toni, choosing her words with care. 'If I asked you to say absolutely nothing to anybody about what's just happened and about meeting Keith here, would you agree?'

'Of course,' Toni replied immediately. 'And no questions asked.'

Keith Hemsley's head shot up. 'I don't believe it!'

'Keith—' Ann began, distressed, but he smiled suddenly, stopping her. 'I mean that I don't believe there could be *two* women in the world who would say a thing like that. I've only met one.' From the way he looked at Ann it was quite clear who the 'one' was. Then his eyes turned to Toni's face seriously and searchingly. 'For the second time in five minutes, I'm prepared to admit a serious error of judgment. Thank you, Miss Warren, you've set my mind at rest - and Ann's too.' He stretched out his hand to Ann and she went and stood beside his chair. He looked up into her face and she smiled down at him; then his arm went round her as if he couldn't bear her to be far away from him.

Toni pulled on the overshoes. 'I'm off,' she said. 'Thanks for the coffee, Ann, and for the loan of all this gear. Don't bother to see me out.'

She grinned at the two of them and sloshed out into the rain. As she paddled through the kitchen garden, brushing against "luxuriant brussels sprouts and sending icy jets of water down the tops of Ann's overshoes, she thought 'Well, that's that! Which was ridiculous, really, because what the relationship was between Ann and Keith Hemsley she had no idea. But the thing that *did* stand out a mile was that there was no relationship at all between Ann and Gray Lawrence, except one of friendship. That was good, that was a relief,

because Ann was much too nice a person to deserve a man like Gray. Running the last few steps and into the shelter of the house, Toni was conscious of an inexplicable lightness of heart.

'And now,' said Benjamin, pushing his gold cigar case across the table to Gray, 'as we're all together it seems a good idea to work out a plan for the immediate future.'

The four of them had just finished lunch in the small dining-room next to the study, Gray having come from his own part of the house to join them, at Benjamin's request. 'When I went to ask him he was just going to open a tin of baked beans,' Mrs. Warren told Toni, looking horrified. 'I just can't *imagine* why he wants to keep himself, with nobody to look after him.' Toni could imagine quite well. She thought it more than likely that he was staying out of her way after last night, but she just smiled and said, 'Oh, I expect he had work to do. He looks the sort of executive who would bring work home to do on Boxing Day, don't you think?'

Now Gray leaned back in his chair, turning his cigar slowly between his fingers, and said, 'My own plan is to return to Town pretty early tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?' Benjamin looked surprised. 'There's nothing as urgent as that, surely? The workroom will be closed.'

Gray shook his head. 'Joe's coming in. He wants to make sure that we're on schedule with the stuff for the Karen Leiner show. You know what a perfectionist the old boy is, and he hates being hurried. I think I should be on the spot to keep an eye on things. And I've promised to see Marsha tomorrow about the Paris collection. She rang last night.'

Benjamin nodded. 'Perhaps you're right. For myself, I intend to be delightfully lazy and spread out the Christmas holiday for the rest of the week, savouring the luxury of my friend Margaret's culinary art.' His twinkling smile went over to Mrs. Warren, who smiled back at him happily.

That's three of us accounted for,' Benjamin said. There remains the problem of the flat in Hornsey.' He turned to Toni. 'I think the best thing, Antonia, if you're agreeable, will be for you to travel to London with Gray tomorrow.'



He can drop you at your flat and you can settle up with your landlady, pack your things, and so on. How does that idea appeal to you?' he added courteously.

Toni glanced at her mother and Mrs. Warreii said quickly, 'Oh, you don't need me, dear, I'm sure. You'll be able to arrange with a carrier to bring everything here. It isn't as if we had any furniture to move. There's only my knitting machine and my sewing machine, and our personal things. I'm sure Mrs. Piatt will be glad to take the contents of the larder off our hands.'

'And Gray won't be far away if you need assistance,' Benjamin added. 'You two can make your own arrangements.' His twinkle included them both. 'Agreed?'

'Yes, of course,' said Toni, and Gray murmured, 'Whatever you say, sir,' rather as if he had received an unwelcome order from some high and authoritative source whose word was law. He was no doubt disliking the idea as much as she was, but he wouldn't question Benjamin's wishes. We're both trapped, thought Toni, pushed into one another's company whether we like it or not, and for the moment there's nothing that can be done about it.

Gray moved back in his chair and said, 'I propose to make an early start in the morning. Would eight o'clock be all right for you?'

'Quite all right,' Toni replied. It was extraordinary how you could sit next to someone all through lunch and not meet their eyes directly. They didn't look at each other now.

He stood up, glancing round the table. 'Perhaps I may be excused? I have some letters to finish.'

'You'll join us for dinner?' Benjamin said.

Thanks, but I'm afraid not. I'm invited to the Bensons', I couldn't get out of it. I'll see you before I leave in the morning, sir,' he added to Benjamin and, sketching a salute to the three of them, he went out of the room.

Benjamin sighed. 'What a pity he has to go out. But he and Midge had so many friends in the neighbourhood and Gray is much in demand, although he gets very little time for socializing. I'm afraid as I do less in the firm the burden of work falls heavier on him. Unfortunately one cannot help growing older.' He turned to Mrs. Warren with his courteous smile. 'But we mustn't let you and Antonia think you are going to vegetate in the country. We must make an opportunity soon for you both to meet some of the pleasant folk who live around here. Perhaps a small party one evening, when Ada comes out of hospital and can take up her work again. I'm looking forward to showing off my new family to our friends.'

'Thank you, Benjamin, that will be delightful,' Mrs. Warren said warmly^ and once again Toni thought how easily and happily her mother was fitting into this new life. She only wished she could do the same.

It was a quiet afternoon, with Gray not emerging from his own part of the house. Toni shooed her mother off to have a rest after lunch, while she explored the kitchen, with all its modern fittings and electrical gadgets. There was everything here to delight the heart of the dedicated cook, and make the work easier. There were mixers, blenders, juicers, sieves, nut mills, coffee grinders, vegetable peelers. The cooker was split-level, with enough dials to make Toni's head reel. But it was just what her mother, with her flair for practical things (look how she'd mastered that knitting machine!) would love. And, brooding over all the rest, ready to swallow up the pans and basins, china and cutlery, was an outsize dishwasher. Toni thought it glared somewhat reproachfully at her as she meekly washed up the luncheon dishes by hand, but she wouldn't have dared to get on familiar terms with it.

Later in the afternoon, the three of them had a companionable tea round the fire in the study, and then Mrs. Warren went off to prepare the evening meal. Benjamin, almost as if he had been waiting for this opportunity, began to talk to Toni about the raw materials, as he called them, of the family business - the precious stones.

'It is the gem stones themselves that are my first love. Since I was a small boy their beauty and mystery has always fascinated me - just as my brother, your grandfather, was fascinated by a different kind of beauty. I think he

believed that our business was merely a commercial enterprise and for that reason he would have none of it. He was a true romantic. But for me there is romance in the fashioning of beautiful objects from the often dull-looking rocks and minerals that have taken millions of years for the earth to produce.'

He talked of rubies and sapphires, emeralds and opals, and other less precious stones that Toni had never heard of. He talked of the distant parts of the world where these stones are found; told her of the long chain of events leading, eventually, to the finished article - the exquisite brooch, or ring, or necklace; of the examination of the 'roughs' by experts whose very livelihood depends on their trained judgment; of the sorting and grading until the 'rough' at last reaches the cutter's critical scrutiny.

'When you realize how long is the process that each stone goes through on its way to becoming the brilliant, gleaming gem you see in the piece of jewellery,' Benjamin said, 'and when you consider the personal attention given to it by men who have devoted their lives to acquiring the necessary skill to judge and work upon the jewel, you can understand why top quality jewellery is so costly.'

Toni sat back in her chair, watching the flicker of the log fire and listening with increasing interest as Benjamin talked on. The 'shop' talk of anyone who knows his subject inside out, and loves it, is always absorbing, and Toni was all the more interested because she was beginning to feel that she was related, however remotely, to the intriguing matters that Benjamin was talking about.

'But the king of gems, to my mind, is always the diamond,' he was saying, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. 'Just think of the romance there - all those pebbles that must have been trodden underfoot for centuries before men realized how much beauty was hidden inside them, and learned to cut and polish them. You see, Antonia, the beauty of the diamond is its "fire", as we call it - that special brilliant shimmer and sparkle, the rainbow play of reflected light. It's always a source of wonder to me that a rough stone can carry such dazzling promise inside it, waiting to be released. Come and look at this.'

He crossed the room and unlocked a drawer in the desk. Somewhere inside the drawer he touched a spring, revealing a small separate compartment. 'My secret hideaway,' he smiled. 'Much more secure than a safe, which advertises itself at sight. In our business, my dear, security is a problem, and I never keep jewels here at home if I can avoid it. In London everything is looked after by experts. But this is my own special diamond and I always have it here.' He took out a small chamois bag and opened it to reveal a whitish pebble, covered with a filmy skin.

'You've heard of a rough diamond?' he smiled, putting the pebble into Toni's hand. 'That is what you have there.'

She turned the pebble round and round delicately, between finger and thumb, intrigued. In one place the skin had been worn through and the spot shone as if there were a hidden light inside the stone.

'To my mind,' Benjamin told her, 'This particular stone is a very good one, possibly flawless.; I bought it some time ago, with the intention of having it cut and mounted for my granddaughter, as a celebration present on the birth of her first child, hers and Gray's. Some day, I told myself, I shall have a great-grandson or a great-granddaughter to carry on the family business. The promise was there, just as the promise of fire is there - locked up inside that rough stone. But it wasn't to be.' He sighed deeply. \*So here it has remained ever since, its beauty waiting to be released. I'm a sentimental old man, you're thinking?'

Toni shook her head, moved by his story, as he put the stone lovingly back in its hideaway. He closed the drawer and locked it. 'Sometimes,' he said, 'I like to think of the millions of years that nature has taken weathering the rocks to produce, eventually, the rare, beautifully crystallized minerals that give us a stone such as this one. *That* is what is important to me,' he went on musingly, 'the continuity. The way that life follows on and on, constantly renewing itself. In the human family you can see this happening. In the precious stone you can only imagine all those aeons of time, and imagining is part of the delight. That is why man-made gems can never be more than a very inferior second best, however beautiful they are.'

'But you can't *make* diamonds, can you?' Toni asked wonderingly. \*Not real diamonds?'

'Small ones, yes. They are made as nature makes them, from pure carbon, speeding up the process a millionfold. But, so far, there is a barrier to the making of diamonds of any size, and that barrier is the enormous heat and pressure required. Am I boring you, Antonia? Is all this too technical?'

'No, not a bit,' she said eagerly. 'Please go on.'

He nodded, pleased at her evident interest. 'What I was going to mention was the synthetic gemstones - the ones that merely imitate nature. Our clever chemists have produced synthetic stones comparable to the diamond in hardness, and sometimes exceeding it in brilliance and fire. They are somewhat akin to these modern materials our clothes are made of nowadays - the wools that have never seen a sheep, the silks that have been spun by giant machines, not silkworms.' He laughed at his own fancy, and Toni laughed with him, liking the old man more and more, and getting a tiny glimpse of the enormous complexity of the business that her family had been engaged in all these years.

'Some people,' went on Benjamin, 'are quite happy with these modern innovations, and perhaps they are inevitable, as we exhaust the natural products of our earth. But to me there is no substitute for a real diamond.'

'Do Warrens use these synthetic stones?' Toni inquired, and Benjamin shook his head, smiling a little. 'We %t Warrens are rather a proud lot, very jealous of our reputation for dealing only in what is real and rare. Rarity, of course, is one of the things that makes a gemstone valuable. The issue of diamonds, for instance, is strictly controlled and supplies of worth-while stones are not abundant. Sometimes, when requested, we make copies of pieces for our own customers.' He sighed. 'It is a poor reflection on the world, I always think, that imitation jewellery is often worn, while the real thing is locked away in a bank for safety.'

He was silent then, sitting back in his big leather armchair, the firelight flickering on the velvet jacket, the ribboned eyeglass, the neatly trimmed white beard. Toni thought again how strange it was that this man, whom she

had only met a few short weeks ago, should now feel to her very much like her own family. Impulsively she leaned forward towards him. 'Thank you so much for telling me all this,' she said. 'And I'm not just being polite when I tell you I'm absolutely fascinated by it.'

Benjamin patted her hand gently. 'That makes me very happy,' he said in his courteous way. 'It would give me the greatest satisfaction if you were sufficiently interested to take some active part in the conduct of our business.'

'Oh, I don't think I should ever be capable—' she began, but he raised his hand, stopping her.

'You have intelligence, my dear, and plenty of time to learn. I will teach you all I can, and Gray, too, will come to see that your help could be invaluable to us in all sorts of ways.' Toni looked very sceptical, but Benjamin shook his head and said enigmatically, 'Gray has been trained to recognize quality when he sees it.'

That was a compliment from Benjamin to her, and she appreciated it, but it hadn't a thing to do with Gray's attitude to her, either now or in the future. Of that she was quite convinced. The situation between her and Gray was rather like the synthetic diamond that Benjamin had been telling her about, she thought with an inward grin. There was plenty of fire there, but under the fire, nothing of real value. What she had to do, she decided firmly, was to avoid the fire and not risk getting burned.

It was after eleven o'clock that same evening when Dominic called for Ann's mackintosh. Benjamin had gone up to bed some time ago, locking the big front door before he went. 'Gray has his own key to the side door,' he said. 'Good night, my dear, and a safe journey tomorrow. Gray will see that all is well with you,' he added, smiling his benevolent smile.

After her mother, too, had gone upstairs Toni still lingered in the hall, curled up on the big chintz-covered settee by the dying fire, deep in a book that Benjamin had given her about the supply and marketing of precious stones.

She was so taken up with this new, fascinating subject that the knock on the door made her jump up, startled.

'Who is it?' she called, and a slightly unsteady man's voice replied from outside. 'It's only me - Dominic.'

She hesitated for a moment and then unlocked the door. He was leaning against the pillar that supported the front canopy, grinning rather foolishly. 'Greetings, sweetheart. S- sorry to be late. Been cel-celebrating at the Black Bull.; Young Farmers, y'know.' His speech was more than slightly slurred.

Toni looked at him uncertainly. She doubted if there was any harm in Dominic, even when he had had rather too much to drink, but she couldn't be sure. Safer to be blunt, perhaps. 'What do you want, Dominic?' she inquired.

He rubbed his nose, looked puzzled. Then he grinned. 'Ann's mac, that's what it is.; Asked me to pick up her mac.' He peered beyond Toni into the hall, lit only by the standard lamp where she had been reading by the fires ^Where's everyone?'

'They've gone to bed,' Toni said, and then wished she hadn't. 'I'd forgotten all about the mac. I put it in the kitchen to drip. Wait a minute, Dominic, and I'll get it for you.'

She could hardly close the door in his face, and she was quickly back again, with Ann's red mackintosh and overshoes. She found Dominic standing by the fire, rubbing his hands together. He had closed the front door. 'B'rrr! Chilly outside,' he remarked conversationally.; 'S'really cosy in here.'

Toni held the mac out to him. 'Will you thank Ann very much for lending it to me and say I'm sorry I forgot. I could have brought them back earlier myself.'

'Ooh no!' He wagged a finger at her. 'Mustn't spoil sport. That's why I took meself off. Mus' give the lovebirds the place to themselves, I thought.' He grinned knowingly.

Toni said nothing. In Dominic's expansive and uninhibited condition he was quite capable of blurting out confidences that Ann would not want anyone to hear.

But her silence seemed to encourage him. 'You know about poor old Ann and her t-tangled love life? Sad story! This fellow teaches at her school - art or some such - crazy about each other. The poor bloke's got a right bitch of a wife/ He checked, looking at Toni with exaggerated penitence.; 'Sorry, love,'

'Look, Dominic,' Toni said hastily, 'you shouldn't be talking about Ann like this, and I think you ought to go home, anyway. It's late.'

'Not late,' he said. 'S'quite early. Let's sit down and talk.' Before she realized what he was going to do he had taken her wrist and pulled her down on to the settee beside him. She tried to struggle up again, but he held her arm tightly. 'Don't go, sweetheart. Stay a bit and talk to me. I feel like talking to someone, and you're so - so pretty in that blue dress.' He straightened his face. 'Don't worry, I'm not really drunk. I'll behave perfectly, that's a promise. Just want to talk. Must tell someone the good news.'

Perhaps it was better to humour him, and fortunately he seemed to have forgotten about Ann. 'What good news?' she asked.;

'Australia!' he announced triumphantly. 'That's what. Pal of mine goin' out there next week - that's what we've been cel-celebrating. Asked me to join him after a while. Great opportunity. Jus' make sure Ann's O.K., then off I go.'

'Well, that's splendid,' Toni said heartily. 'You must tell me all about it some time. Not now, it's much too late.'

But Dominic was going to talk and nothing was going to stop him. In the next half hour Toni heard all about the cattle station, a hundred miles from the nearest town. 'But it's not really all that remote and they're building new roads.' He talked about the homestead, the money there was to be made. 'It's easy to buy your own home, your own car. And it's healthy country - healthy to bring children up in, too. Gosh, it sounds marvellous!' And he talked his



eyes became alert, his speech clear. He was a young man lit by the promise of a good life ahead.

The tall clock in the corner wheezed and struck midnight and Toni jumped to her feet 'Goodness, I didn't know it was as late as that You must really go, Dominic. Come on - up you get!' She held out her hands to pull him up from the deep settee, but when he was standing he didn't release her. He held her hands tightly, looking down into her face.

'You're sweet, Toni. Sweet and sympathetic and lovely. Everything a fellow could want. Look, what d'you say we make for the wide open spaces together? That other fellow of yours was crazy to go off without you. A bloke needs a wife out there and we could have lots of fun together as well as the work. I'm not fooling, sweetheart, I really mean it.' His fair eyebrows drew together earnestly.

'I'm sure you do, Dominic,' Toni soothed.

'And you'll think about it?'

'I'll think about it,' she promised lightly. Safer not to provoke an argument at this time of night, with Dominic in his uplifted state, drunk more with excitement than anything else.

'You're a darling. Just one kiss for luck, and as it's Christmas.' He drew her towards him and kissed her lips gently. 'Um - lovely!' His face came close again, but she drew away. 'No, Dominic, no more. *No!*' - as his arms tightened.

'Ah, sweetheart, be kind. Christmas spirit and all that!' He nuzzled his mouth into her neck.

'No,' she said again. 'Let me go, Dominic, and don't be silly.' She pulled away and they struggled, laughing, like a couple of teenagers. The struggle was still on, not too seriously, when Gray walked into the hall from somewhere at the back of the house, and stood looking at them. It was like opening the lid of a freezer; you could almost hear the crackle of ice as he

said curtly, 'Sorry to spoil the fun, but I think it's time the party broke up if we're to make an early start tomorrow, Antonia.'

Dominic had dropped his arms at the sound of Gray's voice and now he stood staring, rather foolishly, his mouth open. When he had got over his surprise he seemed to feel it necessary to assert himself. 'What the blazes has it got to do with you?' he snapped petulantly. 'We don't have to ask your permission to stay up late.' He drew himself up to his full height, which was a full two inches less than Gray's, and glared pugnaciously into the hard, impassive face.

Gray looked down at him contemptuously. 'You'd better go,' he said 'before I throw you out. You're drunk.'

Dominic's hands clenched at his side. Surely he wasn't going to provoke a fight? Toni thought, her mouth dry. Dominic was stocky and muscular, but in his present state Gray looked as if he could grind him to powder. For what seemed ages they faced each other, Dominic breathing audibly, his face flushed, his fair hair damp and untidy against his forehead. Gray was as motionless as a tiger waiting to spring. He stood nonchalant, hands deep in his pockets. But there was something menacing in his stillness and Toni felt a thrill of fear run right through her body.

She took a step forward. 'It *is* late, Dominic, and Ann will be wondering where you've got to. Thank you for telling me about Australia - I was so interested, but I think you should go now. Take the mac Ann lent me - here it is.' She picked it up from the floor where he had dropped it earlier and draped it across his arm. 'Good night, Dominic.'

He scowled, looking from her to Gray and back again. Finally he said sulkily, 'O.K., I get the message.' He walked not altogether steadily to the door. 'Good night, all,' he said with an attempted flourish of his free hand, and he went out and closed the door behind him with a slam of bravado.

Seething with anger at this whole stupid episode, Toni walked in silence to the settee, picked up her book and turned to the stairs. She wasn't going to brush with Gray in his present high-handed mood.

Then his voice came to her from the shadows by the door. 'He *was* drunk, you know,' he said.

She swung round. Surely he wasn't trying to justify his behaviour? That wasn't at all in character.

'Aren't you exaggerating?' she said coolly. 'Boxing Day - a few drinks with the Young Farmers - surely that's no reason to - to threaten to throw him out?'

He came towards her and she saw the outline of his hard jaw, etched against the glow from the fireplace. 'I wasn't threatening him because he was drunk,' he said, 'but because he was holding you in his arms.'

She knew she shouldn't have stayed to argue, but she heard herself say stiffly, 'Please don't imagine you have to be my protector. I can look after myself perfectly well. And anyway, I wasn't in any danger from Dominic. He's a nice boy - genuine and straightforward and - and gentle,' she added, her eyes on the very ungentle face before her.

'Really?' he mocked. 'Very interesting.' He came close to her. 'Well, as you don't seem averse to distributing your favours at this festive time, perhaps I may claim a share. But I must warn you that I'm not gentle like your nice Dominic. Not in the least gentle,' he added softly, his arm closing round her waist. 'Care for a demonstration?'

His other arm came out, circling her slim body. Dimly she knew she should have pushed him away, but all the power seemed to have gone out of her limbs. She lifted her head and, in the dimness of the big hall their eyes met in a long, wordless look. Madness, she thought, utter madness, as wave upon wave of delight pulsed through her at his touch. She felt herself swaying towards him—

Then, from somewhere outside herself, sanity returned. She twisted her head away and her body went stiff and unyielding in his arms. 'No,' she said. 'I *won't* be just a - a substitute. It's - it's insulting - humiliating—' All her built-in independence suddenly asserted itself.

His arms dropped to his side. 'What the hell are you talking about?' he said.

'You know quite well what I'm talking about.' She flung the words at him as she moved away, out of his reach. 'You want to make love to me because I'm like your wife, because you can pretend it's her you're holding. Because you loved her so much that you want to - to *use* me to take her place. And all the time you're hating me because I'm not her.'

She looked up at his face and at his expression her heart suddenly failed her. 'Is that what you think?' he said very quietly.

'You've made it quite clear, haven't you?' Her mouth was dry and there was an intolerable tightness in her throat. 'I'm sorry if I've hurt you,' she said very low, 'but I had to say it.'

He was still looking at her very strangely and she thought, At last I've got under his guard. She should have been exulting over her victory, but instead she felt small and somehow guilty.

'I'm sorry, Gray,' she said again, and she turned and walked up the stairs. He made no move to stop her.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

TONI was waiting in the hall at precisely one minute to eight next morning. She would rather have died than be late. She wore her cinnamon dress, her brown tweed coat, her new shoes with the buckles. Her russet hair was brushed to a sheen, her make-up was immaculate. Outwardly she was the same Toni Warren who had travelled to Whiteways three days ago. But inwardly something rather strange was happening and it showed now and again in the new, confident lift of her small head, the new glint in her eyes, the new assurance of her movements. Whether she liked it or not, Toni Warren, temporary typist, was rapidly becoming Miss Antonia Warren of the exclusive firm of Warrens of Bond Street.

Four minutes later Gray appeared through the door that led to his part of the house. In his dark town suit and white shirt he looked, Toni thought as she assessed him dispassionately, very much the kind of successful young executive that she had always disliked - conceited, unreasonable, dictatorial, ego-centred.

'Good morning,' she said patiently.

His eyebrows rose a fraction. 'Good morning. Are you ready?'

She consulted her wristwatch, which she had checked with the radio just to make sure. 'Of course,' she said coolly. 'You did say eight o'clock, didn't you?'

He gave her a frowning glance from those oddly-flecked eyes that had so disturbed her peace of mind until this moment. Now she found she could meet them without wilting, which was a small victory. Only a faint shakiness in the knees warned her that she was still vulnerable.

He growled something that might or might not be an apology for keeping her waiting, picked up her small case and opened the front door, waiting with a deferential inclination of his head for her to pass through before him. If he and Toni had been on friendly terms the gesture would have been a joke. As it was, she knew he meant it derisively. He wanted to make her feel small, to remind her that she was giving herself airs in a position that she had won by

trickery. What had he called her? An opportunist, of all nasty-sounding things. Beastly man, she told herself as she swept past him into the chilly December morning.

The journey to London was a vaguely uneasy affair. The memory of the emotional explosion of yesterday evening loomed between them like an impenetrable fog. Not that either mentioned it, but it had the effect of altering completely their approach to each other. Up to now they had met on fighting terms, in close combat. Now the fight was over, and with it the closeness. Gray was polite, thoughtful for Toni's comfort, as courteous to her as Benjamin always was. But this courtesy sat rather oddly on Gray, and she wasn't sure that she liked it. Could it be that she was missing the fight? Surely not! And yet— she sat back against the soft leather of the seat as mile after mile of motorway was swallowed up by Gray's panther of a car, and admitted to herself that there had to be a certain regret about the end of anything, even something as disturbing as a fighting situation with a man you disliked. Still, she had brought it on herself by what she had said to him last night. He wasn't going to forgive her for that. She let out a long sigh.

'All right?' Gray inquired without taking his eyes from the fast lane.

'Yes, thank you,' she said politely, and no more words were exchanged until the car drew up outside the old familiar house in Hornsey.

Gray switched off the engine. 'How long will it take you to wind up things here?'

This took her by surprise. She had imagined she would take her time, stay here overnight, and find her own way back to Whiteways tomorrow. But when she tried to explain this to him he shook his head. 'Benjamin asked me to look after you, and that I mean to do. Can you be clear here by early afternoon?'

He was already in his executive's groove, she thought, clipped, efficient, wasting no words. She considered the question without undue haste, keeping her eyes looking straight ahead up the road. 'Yes, I should think so,' she decided finally. 'But I shall have to find a carrier and it may take some time.'

'I'll arrange that for you. There's a very reliable man who has done work for us. You can tell your landlady that everything will be collected later today, or tomorrow morning at the outside.'

She raised her eyebrows slightly. It was quite absurd that he should take charge of her affairs like this, and in such a highhanded way. He seemed to imagine she was incapable of dealing with such a simple matter herself.

'When you've finished here,' he went on, 'you'd better come along to Bond Street. I'll tell the commissionaire to expect you. I'll probably be there myself, but I'm not sure yet what my movements are, so perhaps you won't mind waiting for me if I'm not back?'

All this politeness must be putting a terrible strain on him, she thought wryly. She said, 'You really don't have to bother about me, you know. I'm quite a capable young woman and accustomed to finding my own way about. I could perfectly well manage to get back to Whiteways under my own steam.'

'No,' he said quite sharply. Then, apparently remembering his new role, he added, 'I don't doubt you're a *very* capable young woman, but it would be rather unnecessary to travel by train on your own when I shall be driving back later on.'

What *could* Benjamin have said to him to bring about this amazing solicitude for her comfort? 'Very well,' she agreed. 'I'll meet you at the Bond Street shop as soon as I'm packed up here. Thank you for the lift,' she added with politeness to equal his own.

She got out of the car and walked with her new dignity to the front door. Fortunately it was unlocked; it would have spoiled the effect if she had had to stop and fumble for her key. Or perhaps it didn't really matter, for Gray's car would no doubt be out of sight before she could open the door. For the moment the tiger was tamed, but he wouldn't be able to keep it up much longer.

She turned to close the door behind her then, and saw, to her utter amazement, that Gray had got out of the car and was coming up the path behind her.

She stared at him blankly, 'Have I - have I forgotten something?'

'Maybe you have.' He was at his most enigmatic, a faint smile playing round the corners of his mouth. She'd seen that smile before. It usually signalled that he was going to come out with some ironic remark to throw her right off balance. But now he said, 'Aren't you going to invite me in for a coffee?'

Bewildered, she found herself almost gabbling. 'Well, yes, of course, if you'd like one. I thought - I'd have asked you before, of course, but I thought you were in a hurry to get away.' To get away from *me*, she added silently to herself.

She was standing just inside the hall, her hand on the front door knob. He was just outside, one step below her. It brought their faces nearly level. It was too absurd, she might have been interviewing the breadman - except that the breadman wouldn't be looking at her like Gray was now, looking steadily with those greenish, flecked eyes, in a way that turned her bones to water. 'Not in all that much of a hurry,' he said.

She opened the door wider. 'Oh! Well, do come in, then. I know we've got coffee and there's some tinned milk. I don't suppose there's any fresh milk, or if there is it'll have gone off since Christmas Eve, won't it? Would you mind tinned milk in your coffee?' She was almost gabbling.

He said gravely, 'I wouldn't mind tinned milk in my coffee.'

As he came into the hall Mrs. Piatt's plump face appeared round her door, beady eyes full of curiosity. 'You're back, then, Miss Warren? I thought I heard you come in. Had a lovely Christmas? Your mother's not with you, then?' She gave Gray an arch glance that might have meant anything.

'Oh, hullo, Mrs. Piatt. No, my mother's staying on in Gloucestershire. I've just come back to pack up our things, and-'



Mrs. Piatt's smile disappeared suddenly. 'You're not *leaving*, Miss Warren?'

'Well, yes, I'm afraid we are. I was going to come in and see you and give notice properly. My mother and I have decided to make our home with our relatives in Gloucestershire.'

Mrs. Piatt's thin eyebrows rose huffily. 'Really? How nice for you! I'm sure I hope you'll be very comfortable. It will be convenient for you to settle up now? A month in advance, in lieu, my terms are, as we agreed when you came.'

'Yes, of course,' Toni said. 'We're paid up to the end of December. I'll give you a cheque for next month's rent.' She hoped their bank account would stand the strain until the very generous cheque that Benjamin had given her could be paid in and go to their credit.

'Oh no, Miss Warren, I must ask for cash, as you're taking your things away.' She glanced at Gray, half apologetically. 'Being a widow, you see, I have to be very careful.' She must have seen something in his face that made her add, 'It isn't that I don't trust you, Miss Warren, but—'

Gray cut in, 'I should hope not. Bring up your account, please, and I'll settle it, in cash.'

Mrs. Piatt's beady eyes seemed to become even beadier. 'Oh well, sir, if *you're* paying the rent for Miss Warren—'

'I am,' said Gray shortly. 'Come along, Toni.' He put his hand at Toni's elbow and urged her up the narrow stairway.

Upstairs in the flat he shut the door behind them and leaned against it. 'Ghastly woman! She's quite sure you and I have been up to no good together. She's probably busy working out at this moment where you've conveniently parked your mother.' He gave her a meaningful glance. 'She couldn't be further off the mark, could she?'

Toni turned away quickly, hoping he hadn't noticed the colour rise in her cheeks. 'It's cold in here, I'll light the fire.' Two matches later she said, 'That's

funny, the slot meter must have run out. I put fifty pence in just before I left so there'd be plenty for when we got back.'

Gray said darkly, 'I expect your landlady has been sitting in front of your fire while you've been away, using up your gas. She looks the type who would.'

Toni was fumbling in her purse for a fivepenny piece, without any luck.

Gray came up to the table behind her. 'Allow me.' He held out a coin and their hands touched briefly. Toni shivered. 'You're cold,' he said. 'Where's that slot meter - let's get the fire going.'

'It's under the sink in the kitchen - the most awkward spot they could find.' In the tiny box of a room it was colder still; the window faced north and she had left it open a little way, to keep the food fresh for when they came home. Toni got down on her hands and knees, opened the cupboard door under the sink and tried vainly to locate the slot in the meter. She was desperately conscious of Gray standing just behind her, and that didn't make her hands any steadier.

'Hadn't you better let me do it?' He was down on the floor beside her. 'Move over.' He gave her a little shove sideways and picked up the coin from where she had dropped it. His dark head was only inches from hers as he bent it to reach into the cupboard and she was aware of the clean, astringent smell that always came from his well-groomed hair.

There was a click as the coin dropped into the box. 'There,' he said. 'You didn't know I was an expert with slot meters, did you?'

They sat back on their heels, side by side, and Toni laughed unsteadily. 'I shouldn't have thought you'd ever have encountered one in the whole of your life.'

'Oh, but I have, I assure you. In my final year at Cambridge I inhabited digs not unlike these. I enjoyed it, it was fun.'

*Fun!* Up to now she hadn't connected that word with Gray, but this morning he was different. He was more relaxed, easier to get on with. It was as if he

had suddenly decided to change his attitude towards her. Well, that suited her. It would make her new life much more pleasant if Gray accepted her as Benjamin had done.

He stood up, put both hands under her elbows and lifted her to her feet. But his hands did not linger, as they had done before. 'You're as light as the proverbial feather,' he said. 'Now, you brew up while I put a match to the fire and we'll toast our toes and drink our coffee.'

Five minutes later they were doing just that, sitting on either side of the gas fire, when there was a tap on the door, which opened immediately to admit Mrs. Piatt, breathing heavily after ascending the stairs. She gave them a suspicious glance and said with thin-lipped meaning, 'I hope I'm not interrupting. Here is Miss Warren's account, Mr.—'

Gray did not supply his name. He counted out notes carelessly and placed them on the table. Toni fetched the rent book to be filled in. Mrs. Piatt folded the notes and placed them carefully in the pocket of her navy blue dress, which bulged in every possible place. When they were safely stowed away she said more amiably, 'And when would you be leaving, Miss Warren?'

'Well - straight away, really.' Toni glanced towards Gray, who nodded emphatically, as if he couldn't agree more. Extraordinary, Toni thought, when only a few days ago he would have been equally enthusiastic about her staying there.

'Then you wouldn't have any objection to a couple moving in, later today? There's a young couple called in, on the offchance. They've just come down from Manchester and are looking for somewhere to live. The name's Thompson. I'll send them up now if that's all right with you.'

The Thompsons were young, in their early twenties, and they looked desperately tired. 'We're both teachers,' the boy told Toni, 'and we're starting here at the beginning of the next term. I suppose we should have realized that it would be almost impossible to find a place to live, but I'm afraid we didn't think of it. We spent the whole week before Christmas tramping round, looking, but it was no go.'

'We're staying with some friends, who have a flat in Bays- water,' the girl took up the story. She was small and delicate-looking, with fair hair and enormous eyes. 'But we can't impose on them much longer.' She grinned wryly. 'We're having to sleep on the floor, you see. Are you two really moving out today?' She looked at Toni and Gray, obviously pairing them off. Then she gazed wistfully round the little sitting room, cosy now with the fire glowing and the bright curtains and cushions. 'It's nice, isn't it, Denis? Just what we wanted. But I suppose a lot of the stuff is yours, isn't it, Mrs.—'

'Warren,' said Toni. 'Well, yes, the furniture and carpets are provided, but everything else belongs to us - to my mother and me. We've been here for two years. I'd be glad to leave the curtains if you'd like them, and I'll have the rest of the flat cleared soon, if you want to move all your stuff in.'

The young Thompsons looked at each other, and the girl said ruefully, 'We haven't really anything to move.' Then, in a rush of confidence, she went on, 'You see, it was all rather sudden. We really meant to wait a bit to get married, but then we had the offer of these jobs in the same school, and we just went off and got the licence and - and that was it, wasn't it, Denis?' She gazed up at her young husband and there were stars in her eyes.

'That was it,' Denis Thompson admitted. He looked at Gray, man to man, and said, 'You know how it is?'

'Sure,' said Gray easily, and Toni said, 'We were just having coffee, would you like some?'

She made two more cups of coffee, and the Thompsons were delighted when Toni offered to leave behind the curtains and linen and blankets and all the kitchen equipment. 'You'd be doing me a good turn if you took them off our hands. We shan't be needing them again.'

The girl looked at her husband a little timidly. 'What do you think, darling?'

He was obviously doing sums in his head. 'Well—' he turned to Toni, 'how much would you want for everything?'

She hesitated, balancing the fact that she didn't really want to ask anything at all, against the necessity of not damaging his pride. It was tricky. 'Not much. Really, you'd be helping me and saving me the trouble of packing everything up.' She named a very moderate sum.

The boy was obviously relieved. 'Oh yes, that would be quite all right.'

Ton! said cheerfully, 'Good, then that's all settled. You two go and fix things with Mrs. Piatt and I'll pack our clothes and personal things and leave them outside on the landing until the carrier comes for them.'

The girl's eyes were enormous. 'You mean - we'll be able to move in straight away? We could pay a month in advance.' She turned her head excitedly, 'Oh, gosh, Denis, wouldn't it be heaven? Let's go and talk to Mrs. Piatt and just *make* her have us.'

They raced off down the stairs and Gray looked at Toni and said, 'They won't have to try very hard. That old biddy won't refuse two months' rent instead of one.' He smiled his most cynical smile, but Toni wasn't noticing, for once. She was standing in the middle of the room and her eyes were very bright. 'Now, isn't that lovely? Doesn't it give you a splendid lift to be able to do someone a good turn - makes you feel sort of warm and happy all over. And they're so nice, and so young, almost children really.'

Gray got up and put his cup on the table. He stood looking down into Toni's flushed face, and as she felt his steady scrutiny and met his eyes her pulses leapt. Elation bubbled up inside her so that she could almost have thrown her arms round his neck and hugged him. Suddenly her world had taken a swing round and everything was different. She didn't know why; perhaps it was seeing the young Thompsons so thrilled and happy, perhaps it was because Gray hadn't wanted to rush away from her. She couldn't have explained, and Gray wouldn't have understood if she had tried, she reminded herself.

The silence lengthened as he stood quite still, looking at her, frowning a little. Toni held her breath. Then he said, 'I begin to think you're almost a child yourself, after all.'

He glanced at his watch. 'I must go or I'll be keeping Marsha waiting, and I mustn't do that. See you later - you'll come to Bond Street when you're finished here?'

He smiled at her and went quickly out of the room without waiting for an answer.

Bond Street hadn't recovered from Christmas. There were none of the usual window-shoppers loitering. Pale-faced business men hurried along with their overcoat collars turned up against the sneaky east wind. Papers blew about the pavement. Like most other people, the street cleaners appeared to have stayed in bed this morning. London was not looking its best, Toni thought as she reached Warrens' showroom. It was evidently closed to the public, for steel security mesh was up, covering the windows, and the heavy plate glass door was locked. Inside she could see the elderly commissionaire hovering the carpet. He had evidently been told to look out for her. Before she could knock at the door he had seen her and hurried across to unlock the door.

'Good morning, Miss Warren.' He touched his cap.

'Good morning.' Toni swept in graciously, grinning to herself. What a difference from last time she came here, applying for a job, only to be thrown out by Gray Lawrence! What a lot could happen in less than three weeks, when your whole life suddenly took a new, strange turn!

'Mr. Lawrence has just come back, miss. He's in his office upstairs. He said to ask you to go straight up when you arrived.'

'Thank you.' Toni made her way through the elegant rooms, up the softly-carpeted stairs, to the door marked 'Mr. G. R. Lawrence.' She walked in without knocking.

Gray looked up from the big mahogany desk, littered with letters and papers and files. His dark hair was rumpled and there was a worried frown between his brows.

'Hullo,' Toni said cheerfully. 'Here I am, according to instructions.'

The frown relaxed only marginally. 'You managed the packing all right?' he said absently. He dropped the letter he was reading and surveyed her doubtfully. 'Look, Toni, I'm afraid I'm not going to be much use to you after all. I've only just got in myself - I had to go out to Richmond to see a silly woman who's managed to get a lot of her jewellery stolen while she's been away for Christmas. She couldn't find a proper description to give to the police and wasn't even sure if she'd paid the last insurance premium. She'd worked herself into a real state and expected me to take over everything for her. Helpless, dithery type. Used to having a husband about to feather-bed her, but he's away in Hong Kong.'

Toni said nothing but looked sympathetic, as her secretarial training had taught her, while Gray continued with his chapter of woes. 'As if that wasn't time-wasting enough, when I got back here I found that Mrs. Janes is away with 'flu, and the girl Miss Black was supposed to be sending me from the agency today hasn't turned up. So—' he waved a hand towards the desk '—I'll have to tackle this lot on my own. Sorry, but you'll have to find your own way back to Whiteways after all.' He pulled the telephone towards him. 'I'll ring up Enquiries and check on trains for you and then—'

'Just a minute.' Toni's clear voice, breaking into his catalogue of grumbles, made him look up, eyebrows lifted. 'You've no need to feather-bed *me* > you know,' she smiled. 'I'm perfectly capable of finding out about trains and getting myself on to one.'

The frown relaxed briefly and something like a gleam of humour lit his eyes. 'So you are, I keep forgetting.' He pushed the phone towards her across the desk. 'Help yourself,' he said, and went back to his correspondence.

The phone number of Paddington Enquiry Office was well established in Toni's memory. She took off the receiver, paused, and replaced it.

'If I stayed on, could I help?' she said.

There was a pause, then he lifted his head. 'You mean - to *work*? On *this*? He waved his hand at the untidy desk.;

'Of course. I'm quite used to working, you know.'

He seemed to need to get something straight.: 'But why should you? You don't have to work now.'

She wasn't quite sure, herself It had something to do with the harassed expression he was wearing; she wanted to see it disappear, for some reason. Perhaps it was just her secretarial training again. But she said, 'Uncle Benjamin wants me to take an interest in the business. This would be an opportunity to see what goes on.'

'My side of the business isn't very glamorous,' he said dryly. 'I deal in contracts and leases and customs duties, and suchlike. Very unromantic stuff.'

'But necessary,' she said firmly.:

He was still looking slightly incredulous.; 'What can you do?'

She smiled. 'You didn't read my dossier from Miss Black that day? I thought you didn't.'

'Touche,' he said; 'But you know very well I didn't - *and* you know why.'

'Well,' she said, checking on her fingers.; 'Shorthand speed good, typing excellent. French and Italian at A level. Some German. Book-keeping? No, I'm afraid not; I could never fathom double entry; Can you use my help?'

Suddenly he smiled. It was a real smile, not bitter, nor cynical, nor ironic. It made him look years younger.

'Who am I to reject such dazzling expertise?' he said. 'Take off your coat and let's get going!'

Toni found she could take the work in her stride, which was a relief. Gray's method and approach to his job suited her and she found herself admiring the speed and acuteness of his mind. He didn't dither over decisions. If a problem arose he considered it silently, made up his mind, dealt with the



matter, and then went straight ahead to the next point. But, quick as he was, he was considerate too, and paused now and again to make sure she was keeping abreast. After a time he seemed to take her efficiency for granted, and devoted his whole attention to the work in hand.

At five past three he slapped the final letter into its wire basket, leaned back in his chair, and said, 'Was that a baptism of fire?'

Toni smiled. 'I think I've got it all down, with the exception of one word.' She flicked back in her notebook. 'It was in that letter to the Brazilian agents about a parcel of opals. Chat... something.'

'Chatoyancy.' He spelled it for her. 'It's a kind of coloured shimmer you get with precious opals. Only some opals are classified as precious, you know, and those weren't really up to Warren's standard. I expect we'll have a battle on our hands with the agents, but we can't risk our reputation by settling for anything but the best.'

'To sell to silly women with too much money, like the one in Richmond?' Toni said. But she spoke thoughtfully, not provocatively.

He answered in the same spirit. 'Sometimes, admittedly. But isn't there more to it than that? It's not fashionable to talk about beauty, but the craft of working with precious stones and precious metals goes back to the beginning of civilization. It's my guess that if the satisfaction of working with one's hands loses out completely to the machine, we're done for. But I don't believe that will happen.'

This was a new Gray, serious, thoughtful. Toni felt a quick glow of pride that he should consider her sufficiently responsive to talk to like this.

'Do you yourself—?' she began rather timidly.

'Work with my hands?' He smiled. 'Not enough. I did once, under Joe Lattimer's eagle eye. He's a dedicated craftsman if ever there was one. My father was Benjamin's partner, you know, and he was determined I should learn the job from the bottom up, so after Cambridge I went through my training good and proper. One day I'll show you some of my early

masterpieces.' He grinned across the desk at her. 'If my father had lived I might have been famous, who knows? But he died, and I took over his side of the business, which is - as you've just seen - time-consuming. So now I no longer make pretty baubles.' He changed the subject abruptly. 'When did you last eat?'

She blinked. 'Er - breakfast, I think.'

'So did I. So what do you think about going along to chase up Carli and see if he can send something in? He won't bat an eyelid, he's used to our eccentric habits of eating. You remember the way?'

Toni remembered the way to Carli's. As she battled along, head down against the chill of the wind, she remembered the first time, coming here with Gray, when he'd been so studiously beastly to her. He had tried his best to frighten her away, but he had failed. She had stayed to take her place as a Warren, to be part of the family firm, to be accepted as even Gray himself had accepted her this afternoon. Her world had suddenly opened out into a bright, exciting place, with a vague promise of something waiting, something so thrilling that she didn't dare put a name to it.

She found the turning into the passageway and ran up the steps to the restaurant as if her feet had wings.

At first the place seemed deserted, but finally Toni found Giovanni in a corner of the dining-room, drinking coffee, smoking and reading a paperback with a lurid cover. He remembered her and jumped to attention when she walked in. '*Scusi, signorina!*' He flushed to the roots of his wavy black hair. 'Beesness is slack today. Lunch for two in Mr, Lawrence's office? *Si, si*, I tell Signor Carli,'

Gray Lawrence evidently ranked V.I.P. at Carli's. Inside a quarter of an hour Giovanni arrived at the upstairs office, bearing a loaded tray. Apologetically he explained, 'Signor Carli's compliments and it ees the best he can manage. So soon after the holiday you understand, *signore?*'

Gray made room for the tray on the big desk. Tell him not to worry, Giovanni, I'm sure it's splendid.'

The waiter nodded, beaming. 'I bring coffee soon,' he promised, and departed.

Toni moved some papers and spread out the little cloth which had come folded at the side of the tray. 'It looks absolutely delicious.' She set out newly-baked rolls, butter, a dish of a mouth-watering cold collation, tiny satsuma oranges, nuts, and a variety of cheeses. 'I can't wait,' she grinned apologetically, nibbling a corner of roll. 'I didn't realize I was so hungry. I love a picnic, don't you? I make any old excuse to eat in odd places, instead of formally round a table.'

Gray's dark head was bent as he extracted the cork from a bottle of wine. 'I said you were a child, didn't I? Now I'm sure.' The cork came out with a plop and he straightened up. 'Toni—' he said in a different tone.

'Yes?' She turned, butter knife in hand..

There was a silence. He was frowning in a puzzled way, searching for words. Finally he said, 'It's just that I see now that I've been wrong about you, wrong in every way. I've been unfair and unkind. I'm sorry.'

Her eyes widened. Her mind went into a spin. What was he sorry for? There were so many things he *could* mean, but one stood out in front. He was apologizing for having made love to her, for having tried to - she shied away from the word, then faced it squarely - to seduce her. He had taken it for granted that because she was so like his beloved Midge she must resemble her in other ways too. He had imagined she was a mature woman, knowing her way about in the present-day world of adults. Now he had discovered that she was just a naive, inexperienced country girl after all.

She flushed deeply. 'Forget it,' she said, 'Don't let's talk about it any more.'

'That's more than I deserve,' he said in his serious voice. Then he smiled and poured wine into two glasses. He lifted his and mischief glinted in the green-flecked eyes. 'Here's hoping you can transcribe those notes, Toni,' he said.;

That put her just where she belonged, didn't it - in the 'little typist' league. She made her voice light and gay as she replied, 'Oh, I'm sure I can give satisfaction, sir.'

Then the telephone rang on the desk at Gray's elbow. He picked up the receiver. 'Yes. Yes. Oh, hullo, Marsha, I've been waiting to hear. Where are you? Oh, I see. Yes, next week. I had a ring from Karen and she's reasonably happy about things.' A long pause, then, 'Is he? Oh well, you know what an old worrier Joe is. Everything's got to be perfect, and dead on time. He'll make it all right, I'm sure. Look, why not come along here when you're ready and we can have a talk? O.K. 'Bye.'

He replaced the receiver and helped himself from the creamy contents of the main dish. 'Looks good. Prawns - mushrooms - asparagus - chicken - good old Carli, he's produced a lovely mixture. That was Marsha, our clever new designer, by the way. She's coming along here in a few minutes. At the moment she's at the workroom, putting over some of her ideas to Joe.' He chuckled. 'Joe's somewhat traditional, but Marsha will get her own way in the end; she has tact as well as talent She'll be invaluable to the firm.'

Toni smiled rather stiffly. Marsha sounded like Gray's kind of woman, certainly not hers. And when Marsha walked in, soon after Giovanni had brought the coffee, she was confirmed in her guess. The visual impact was designed to stun, and it appeared to have that effect on Gray, who went forward to greet her with a faintly dazed look.

'Marsha, you look wonderful, as you always do,' he said, and she reached up and kissed him.

'Thank you, Gray, you are so sweet,' she replied, and the faint accent put the finishing touch to the impression of exotic perfection. In the mahogany and anaglypta of the office she glowed like a sultry flame. Near-black hair, smooth to her head, limpid dark eyes, and the high cheekbones and flawless skin of the Slav beauty. A figure like a dream. A long, fitting coat of supple magenta velvet with a collar that rose gently to caress the lovely line of her chin. Her only ornament a giant-size brooch in gold, in a curious, twisted design, and set with some smooth dark stone that Toni didn't recognize, the colour of damson juice. This was Marsha, Warrens' new designer.

Gray introduced them. It wasn't fair, thought Toni, to be confronted with this gorgeous girl, who was indispensable to Warrens, just when she had thought she was beginning to fit in to Warrens herself. The gulf between them was too wide and deep altogether.

But Marsha didn't seem aware of any gulf. She took the hand that Toni held out and smiled at her. Against the dark cream of her skin her teeth were white, like peeled nuts. 'You're Antonia, Benjamin's family. He told me about you.' She stood surveying Toni for a moment or two, assessingly. Then she said, 'But you are beautiful. Your hair is - how shall I say — like the leaves of a beautiful tree we have at home. I do not think it grows here. You should wear it swept over - so!' She took a handful of Toni's hair and demonstrated.

Surprised, Toni drew back and Gray laughed. 'Marsha always wants to make people over,' he said. 'She can't resist designing things.'

'Oh, I am so sorry.' The dark eyes expressed contrition. 'Gray is right - I push myself forward. You will forgive me?'

She sounded completely sincere. I will *not* let myself be prejudiced, and I *will* keep my end up, Toni thought. She walked to the mantelpiece and surveyed herself in the oval, gilt-framed mirror that was Gray's only concession to ornament in his office. 'Do you know, I think you're right, Marsha. I shall try it that way.'

The other girl came up behind her, arranging Toni's heavy russet-gold hair this way and that, standing back like an artist to survey the different effects, with little coos of approval.

At last Gray said, 'When you two have quite finished, there *was* a little matter of business to talk over. And Toni and I do have to drive home tonight.'

Marsha turned quickly. 'Oh, my poor Gray, had we forgotten all about you? I will report immediately.' She pulled up a chair and sat down close to him at the desk, arranging the vivid magenta coat around her with effortless grace. 'Joe sends a message that he is working overtime to finish our big

showpiece. The emerald necklace - you remember? We thought, Karen Leiner and I, that it must be worn with her white ball gown. I have seen it. Gray, it is a dream. The line - the subtlety - sublime!'

Toni picked up her notebook. 'Sorry to interrupt, but where do I type these letters?'

Gray got to his feet, explaining to Marsha, 'Toni is helping me get through my correspondence. When I got here I was confronted with a backlog of letters and no secretary.' He opened the door of a small adjoining room. 'Afraid this is the best Warrens can offer. No custom-built office accommodation here. Not very luxurious, but help yourself.'

Toni looked around. A typist's desk, a chair, a typewriter, a filing cabinet and that was all. 'I'll cope,' she said. Gray hesitated for a moment as if he were going to speak, then he just nodded and went back to Marsha, closing the door behind him.

Toni sat down at the desk, opened drawers to locate paper and carbon. So this was where she would have worked if she had just been a secretary applying for a job, on that first day, and not Miss Antonia Warren, great-niece of Benjamin Warren, she thought with a half smile. And Gray Lawrence would have been just another boss, instead of - instead of - well, what exactly *was* he to her? Her mind refused to answer.

From the adjoining room came the sound of Marsha's low, gurgling laugh, as fascinating as everything else about her. Then a sound she hadn't heard before; Gray too was laughing aloud, a deep, somehow intimate laugh, as if he were enjoying himself enormously in Marsha's company.

Toni whipped the cover from the typewriter and settled down doggedly to type the first letter.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

TONI was a quick, accurate typist. She tried to slow down, to make the work last out until Marsha had gone, until she could no longer hear the low voices, punctuated now and again by that shared laughter from the next office. But time passed, the twilight outside the window merged into darkness, and finally she could wait no longer. She gathered the letters together, and there was quite a pile of them, took them into Gray's room and put them on the desk near him. There you are, sir, all submitted for your approval.' Gay. Teasing. Underlining the fact that she was Miss Antonia Warren, not a little typist. For Marsha's benefit, of course. Gray would not be impressed, but she needed to keep up her end with Marsha.

But as Gray drew the pile of letters towards him he looked up at her and smiled. Thanks, Toni, you've saved my sanity. What a blessing you learned to type - a most useful accomplishment!

He had seen that she was trying to save her silly little pride and he had helped her. That was kind of him, kind and perceptive. Benjamin had told her that Gray was sensitive and she hadn't believed him, but now she did.

Marsha was on her feet, the velvet coat clinging with her supple movements. 'I must go. I shall delay your journey. Au revoir, Gray. I shall see you very soon?' She put a hand on his arm. 'You know where to find me, yes?'

'Yes,' said Gray. 'I'll come down with you. I expect Bates has gone home. I told him not to wait for me.'

Marsha picked up her handbag. It was as gorgeous as everything else about her, of soft black leather, with an ornate jewelled clasp. 'Good-bye, Miss Warren - Antonia.'

To Toni's surprise the other girl leaned forward and kissed her lightly and a drift of subtle perfume hung for a moment on the air. 'We must see a lot of each other, yes? Gray tells me you will join the team. Come along. Gray, and fasten all your formidable locks behind me.'

It seemed to take him a long time to see Marsha off the premises. When he came back he was looking pleased with life. That seems to be that, all fixed up. The show should be good - Karen Leiner clothes and Warren jewellery. You must come up to town for it, Toni, you might like to buy something.'

He was trying to be friendly - the new friendliness that she didn't quite know how to take - but she didn't think he was really interested. She smiled and said, 'My buying model clothes! It seems crazy.'

'Very sensible, I'd say. Leiner's style would suit you, you're the right shape.' But he didn't look at her, he was reading the first letter.

'I didn't mean they wouldn't suit me. I meant the prospect of having money in the bank even to consider buying model clothes.'

He said absently, 'Oh, you may as well get used to the idea. It'll be expected of you if you join the team, as Marsha put it.' He put his signature to the top letter of the pile.

Toni felt dashed. He was obviously bored with the subject, which wasn't really surprising, she admitted honestly, after being in Marsha's company. She stood waiting in silence until the last letter was signed and in its envelope. And she was still silent as they left the showroom and walked along the chilly, post-Christmas streets to the garage where he kept his car. 'We'll just call in at the workroom first. I've got one or two things to see Joe about. Then we'll head back to Whiteways; we should be there in time for dinner.'

The old building which housed the Warren workroom was even seedier than Toni remembered. The ground floor was evidently empty - probably uninhabitable now the vandals had got at it. The windows were boarded up, and even the boards had been hacked away in places. Painted slogans stared from the walls. Mud had been flung at the slogans and still adhered in dried-up brown crusts.

Gray stopped the car and looked up at the crumbling building. 'Dreadful dump, isn't it? Who would imagine now that this was quite a respectable



area when Warrens first came here? Benjamin has plans for moving the entire workroom out to Whiteways.'

'Sounds a good idea,' Toni said. 'Would the men like that?'

'Joe's in favour. His wife likes the prospect of country life and what she says goes, with old Joe. He thinks the world of her. Some of the others may present a problem, but if we can provide accommodation for them in the village it may work out. There's something you might amuse yourself with, Toni, a spot of social welfare work.'

She thought she detected the old note of sarcasm in his voice again, but she didn't rise to it. 'I should enjoy that,' she said quietly.

This time she didn't argue about staying in the car while Gray interviewed Joe. The dingy, almost empty street had a vaguely menacing air about it tonight. Probably just her imagination, but she didn't fancy being on her own here. They climbed the rickety wooden stairs and found Joe Lattimer alone in the workroom as he had been that first time Gray brought her up here. He seemed pleased to see them and proudly produced the necklace that he was finishing for the Karen Leiner show. At the sight of it Toni drew in her breath with sheer delight. The step-cut emeralds, shining like deep green mountain tarns, were linked by smaller, square clusters of diamonds, set in platinum and finished with a superbly designed clasp that seemed to her to bear Marsha's hallmark.

Joe took her hand and draped the necklace across it. Then he switched on all the lights in the workroom so that the jewels glittered and sparkled. Toni turned her hand this way and that, admiring the lovely thing. 'It's exquisite - perfect - and superbly made.' She lifted her head and smiled at the elderly craftsman. 'Doesn't it give you a marvellous sense of pride and achievement to be able to make something as beautiful as this?'

'Ah, it does indeed, miss.' Joe looked faintly embarrassed, but he beamed with pleasure. 'I can see you understand how it feels. You wouldn't be an artist yourself, Miss Warren?'

She shook her head. 'No, I wish I were. But my father was an artist and he used to talk to me sometimes about the joy of - of just creating something. May I come and watch you working some time?'

'Indeed you may. We'd be honoured, Miss Warren.'

Toni wandered round the workroom While Gray discussed business with Joe, looking with interest at the separate benches with their equipment and their banks of tiny drawers for instruments and she felt a rising of enthusiasm for the family business, for the whole complex chain of happenings that began millions of years ago, when the crust of the earth was laid down, and ended in the shaping of a thing of real beauty which could, in its turn, live on for as long again. As she followed Gray down the wooden stairs a few minutes later she said, 'I think I see what you mean now, about tradition and craftsmanship and the importance of going on making perfect things.'

He glanced over his shoulder. 'You won't need any more persuading to take your rightful place in the firm, then?' She thought she detected irony in his voice, but she was better prepared than she had been. 'No, I certainly won't,' she said firmly. 'I'm looking forward to it.'

He didn't reply. He pushed open the outside door and stepped on to the pavement, with Toni following close behind, close enough to be aware of his whole body stiffening to alertness as he looked about him. 'Good grief,' he exploded, 'it's gone! The car's gone!'

He stood on the edge of the pavement, looking along the road and giving voice to anger in the kind of exclusively masculine language that Toni hadn't heard from Gray before. Except for a couple of boys half-way along the street there was nobody to be seen and not a car in sight. He crossed the road and spoke to them and Toni saw something change hands - money, no doubt. When he came back his face was grim. 'They saw three men getting into a car. Didn't notice what they looked like. They thought one of them was carrying a bag. Oh well, this is a police job. I'll do some phoning.'

Up in the workroom again there was a lengthy telephone conversation with the police, while Toni and Joe Lattimer could do nothing but listen and wait.

When he had finished Gray hung up the receiver of the wall telephone and said, 'You haven't got your car at the back, by any chance, Joe?'

'Sorry, Mr. Gray, I didn't bring it in today. The wife had some shopping to do.'

'I'll walk to the station, then, it'll be quicker than trying for a taxi. They want me to sign a statement and give more particulars.' He looked at Toni, frowning. 'There's no point in trailing you round with me. You stay here and Joe will look after you and I'll collect you when I'm through with the law.'

When he had gone Toni and Joe discussed the matter at length. Joe said it was likely they'd find the car abandoned somewhere, when the villains had done with it. 'They just use 'em to get away and then leave 'em. It's happening all the time,' he added glumly. 'There's a place along the road that's been raided three times this last year. Electrical components they make, small stuff, but I suppose there's a good sale for it and it'd be difficult to trace.' He heaved a sigh. 'I'd be glad to get out of London, I don't mind telling you, Miss Warren.'

'Have you ever been broken into here?' Toni looked round the workroom; it all seemed ancient and rather vulnerable.

Joe grinned.; 'Not much fear of that. There's plenty here they'd like to get their hands on, but it wouldn't be worth it to them; The word gets around, and they know there isn't a chance in ten thousand they'd get away with anything. Mr. Gray is a keen man - he keeps right up to date with security. You'd be surprised if you knew all the latest gadgets we've got here, this new electronic stuff, of course. I'd like to see the villains try it on. All hell would break loose before they could get their dirty hands on a single diamond or a bit of gold. It was different in old Mr. Lawrence's day - that's Mr. Gray's father - not so much of this crime and violence then.' He shook his head regretfully. 'It's a pretty tough world now, Miss Warren, but Mr. Gray knows his way about in it. He's up to the minute, if you know what I mean.'

'I do know,' Toni said. However tough the world, Gray Lawrence would be quite capable of holding his own in it, she felt sure. He would be surprised at nothing, and from the contemporary scene he would select just what suited

him and reject the rest. In manners, in social conventions, in morals - particularly in morals, she thought with a half smile - Gray wouldn't consider himself bound by any restraints. If he wanted a woman he would take her - if he could get her.- And yet he was honourable according to his own code; He had promised Benjamin he would look after her, and he would. Just so long as he felt himself bound by that promise he wouldn't try to make love to her. Suddenly she was remembering last night in the hall at Whiteways.

Remembering the warm laziness of Christmas, and the feeling of Gray's arms holding her close, remembering the almost overwhelming temptation to strain her body closer to his, to give back kiss for kiss. Only that independent pride of hers had stopped her. And a very good thing it had, she thought now.

It must have been nearly an hour before Gray came back. Joe had made a pot of tea and they were drinking out of mugs and munching digestive biscuits, and he was telling Toni about the garden he meant to have when they moved the workroom to Gloucestershire.

He got to his feet as the door opened. 'Any luck, Mr. Gray?'

Gray looked tired and frustrated. He shook his head. 'The police have put out a call, but they didn't seem very hopeful that I'll see my car again tonight. There's been a big bank raid somewhere at the other end of town, and they're not all that interested in one car missing. So—' he shrugged '—we'll just have to wait and see.'

Joe said worriedly, 'Anything of value in the car, Mr. Gray?'

'Nothing particular. Except—' he looked at Toni '—your overnight case was in the car. That's gone, I'm afraid.'

'There wasn't anything that matters in it,' she assured him, trying to remember what had been in it. But in any case, they'd be going back to Whiteways tonight. Her thoughts checked. But *would* they be going back tonight now this had happened? And if not, where would they go? She looked quickly at Gray, but he was prowling round the workroom, peering

under benches and into cupboards. Toni guessed that he was satisfying himself about the security devices. Finally he inspected the massive steel safe at the end of the room. 'Everything locked up, Joe? Good, then we'll be going. I've got a taxi waiting outside so we can put you on your way home.'

They dropped Joe off at Victoria, and Gray leaned forward and gave a new instruction to the driver.

'Where are we going?' Toni asked, as the taxi set off along Buckingham Palace Road.

'To my flat. I've got a small service place in Chelsea. Rather nice. We can have a meal and then sort things out.'

His tone was deliberately casual. What things, she wondered, would they sort out? Where were they going to spend the night? She glanced nervously at his face as lights flashed intermittently through the window of the taxi, but it told her nothing.

Presently the taxi drew up outside a large, imposing old house on the Chelsea Embankment. Inside, all was hushed carpeted luxury, with a great bowl of blue hyacinths giving off an overpowering scent. There were cloakrooms, a telephone room, and several small lobbies, inside which were white doors with flat numbers on them. Toni couldn't help momentarily comparing it with the Hornsey flat, and found, to her rather ashamed surprise, that she could hardly remember exactly what it had looked like when it had been home.

A small lift swished them silently to the second floor. Gray fitted his key to Number 17 and opened the door for Toni to go in.

He pulled off his light overcoat and tossed it across a chair. 'Help yourself.' He waved a hand casually. 'Bathroom there, bedroom opposite. I'm sorry about losing your case; do you carry what you need in your handbag?'

'Yes, thanks.' What did she need - a comb, a powder compact? She certainly didn't intend to try some elaborate and seductive make-up for his benefit.

'Good, well, the first thing is to lay on a meal,' he said briskly. 'I'm hungry and I'm sure you are. Carli's lunch was adequate but hardly filling. They can put on a very good grill here at short notice. That's what I would suggest, unless you're particularly keen on going to a restaurant. If you agree I'll go down and talk to the cook and see what she can rustle up for us. She's a good friend of mine, and personal contact is more satisfactory than using the phone at such time, I find.'

He smiled, the greenish flecked eyes narrowing wickedly. Yes, he could turn on the charm when he wanted something, she thought, a little surprised at the readiness with which her thoughts took this cynical twist. Was this new life having its effect already on her outlook?

She shrugged. 'Whatever you say. I'm in your hands at present.'

He walked to the door and turned. The wicked gleam was in his eyes again. 'Did you really mean that?' he inquired. But he didn't wait for a reply.

That look of his had its usual devastating effect on her breathing, but when she had pulled herself together she explored the flat - what there was of it. It was very small, very luxurious, very modern, an expensive *pied-a-terre* for a London businessman with a home in the country. She wandered round somewhat nervously, peeped into the kitchen, where everything was on a miniature scale, just large enough to prepare a meal for two. She could imagine some elegant girl like Marsha, drifting in here after a theatre or a concert, whipping up an omelette, calling gaily through the open partition hatch to Gray, who lounged in one of the deep armchairs in the living-room. Another door led to the bathroom in sea-green with shining white fittings. She opened the fourth door off the tiny lobby and saw a bedroom, sleek and tidy, with a double bed. Quickly she came out and closed the door, feeling a little like Bluebeard's wife must have felt. Only one bedroom. Well, that settled it, she told herself firmly, there was no question of them sharing the flat for the night. She must establish that straight away with Gray when he came back.

In the bathroom she washed quickly and turned to the long mirror to tidy her hair. On the glass shelf beside it someone had put a handkerchief, a delicate hand-embroidery on the fine white lawn. Even before she made out the

intricately designed 'M' in one corner she recognized the subtle perfume that hung in the air around Marsha. Oh, well! Toni shrugged, took a comb from her handbag and pushed it carelessly through her hair. At the bottom of the handbag was a nylon rainhood that tied with a fine black silky cord. On a sudden impulse she pulled out the cord, strained her hair back into a ponytail and knotted it firmly. Then she stood back to examine the result in the mirror. It reminded her of a snapshot someone had taken of her in the fifth form at school. Certainly the resemblance to her elegant and sophisticated cousin Midge seemed to her to have vanished completely. There could be very little about the naive young girl who looked back at her to remind Gray of the wife he had lost.

She returned to the living-room to find that Gray had come back and was standing under one of the stainless steel spotlights, turning over the pages of a newspaper. His eyebrows went up briefly as he glanced over at her and she saw he had remarked the change in her hair-style - not to the intriguing style that Marsha had suggested for her, but to a simple, little-girl look. But he made no remark. Instead he held the evening paper out and she saw the splash headlines: ANOTHER BANK RAID POLICE IN CAR CHASE ONE MAN SHOT. Gray shrugged. 'As I thought, they won't be very interested in looking for *my* car tonight.' He tossed the paper down. 'It seems that we'll have to stay in town for the night, Toni.'

'Couldn't we - isn't there a train we could catch?'

A smile that she didn't want to interpret played around his mouth. 'Worried?' he inquired. 'You did say you were in my hands, I seem to remember.'

Her eyes widened. 'I - I didn't mean—' she floundered.

He laughed aloud then. 'Didn't you? Oh well, we'll see. Meanwhile, suppose we remove the disguise? I wouldn't like Mrs. Wood to think I'm baby-snatching when she brings our meal up.' Before she realized what he was going to do, his hand had gone up and he had pulled the cord that was restraining her hair. It tumbled round her shoulders and into the curve of her neck like russet satin. Gray flicked at it lightly with finger and thumb. 'That's better,' he said, and moved away from her immediately.

'I'd better ring Whiteways and give Benjamin the news,' he said. He took the telephone out from its recess and sat down in one of the deep chairs holding the instrument on his knees and, taking no further notice of her, began to dial.

Toni found she was trembling with anger, or some more complicated emotion. How dared he treat her like that, casually, almost contemptuously, as if she were a stray kitten he found himself saddled with?

She watched him sitting there, his dark head bent over the telephone, his long legs stretched out, his whole attitude confident, at ease, and she thought that the answer wasn't very far to seek. At first, her superficial likeness to his adored Midge had disturbed him; he had told her so. Then over Christmas, in the familiar home surroundings, he had tried to pretend that she *was* Midge, that he had his wife back in his arms. He would have taken all he could get from her without the slightest consideration for how she felt. But all this was changed now. He was back in London in his real milieu, running a complicated business almost single-handed. He had been glad of her help this afternoon, but his need for her as a woman had gone. Here, he didn't need the fantasy of Midge. He had the real-life Marsha, who was no doubt much more satisfying in every way. Toni lifted her chin and stiffened her back. That was what she wanted, wasn't it? It was a relief that she wouldn't have to fight him any more. Or fight yourself, a small voice added, so low that she could almost ignore it.

Gray had got through to Whiteways now and was speaking to Benjamin, explaining about the stolen car.. so I'm afraid, sir, that we won't be able to get back tonight. The only way would be to try to hire, and quite frankly I'm not particularly keen on the driving, especially as I'll have to come back to town tomorrow. It's been quite a day. Antonia? Yes, she's fine. She's been a great help to me in the office.' A pause. 'Yes, I quite agree. Yes, I'll do that - that was what I was thinking of. We're at the flat at the moment, just going to have a meal.' He laughed. 'Yes, I promise faithfully to look after her. Would you like to have a word with her yourself?'

He kept the instrument on his knee, holding out the receiver to Toni. She took it from him, standing as far from the chair as the cord would allow, as she listened to Benjamin deploring the theft of Gray's car. 'It's a pity your



mother isn't here, you could have spoken to her. She's over at the cottage at the moment - I think she's gone to get some eggs for breakfast - apparently we have run short. I shall reassure her when she comes in. Are you really all right, Antonia? Not too tired?'

'Yes, I'm fine, truly I am,' she told him, and felt Gray's arm reach out to encircle her waist and draw her down on to the arm of his chair.

'Gray tells me you've been helping him at the office.'

'As well as I could,' she murmured, disturbingly conscious that Gray's arm was still lying along the arm of the chair behind her and that he was leaning back, looking up at her with that half-smile she was beginning to know so well. She wished she could interpret it.

'Very well, my dear child, I feel quite happy about you as Gray is there to look after you. You'll let us know how things work out, won't you?'

She promised, said good-bye, and gave the receiver back to Gray, who started to go into some business details with Benjamin. But as she would have stood up, that firm arm held her on the arm of the chair. She wriggled, but it was to no avail; she was held tightly. She just had to stay where she was until the conversation was over.

At last Gray had finished. He replaced the receiver and put the instrument down on the floor. '*Will* you let me go?' Toni hissed, straining away from him.

He clicked his tongue. 'And I thought we were friends,' he said reprovingly. 'I imagined you weren't hating me quite so much.'

'Why should you think I hate you?' she faltered, still held tightly.

There was a long silence. He looked up at her, his eyes speculative. Meeting that look she began to tremble inside. It only needed one quick movement on his part for her to be pulled down on to his knees, into the depth of the big armchair. Toni felt helpless, magnetized, her whole treacherous body aching for just that to happen. For the space of time that their eyes met and held, she

knew it was going to happen. Almost she could feel the hard strength of his arms around her, the roughness of his cheek against her own, the sure way his mouth would claim hers. Dimly she was aware that her longing must be reflected in her face, in her eyes, but she couldn't help it.

Then he released his hold and got to his feet. 'Why should I think you hate me? Oh, I don't know, I just got that impression,' he said casually. He walked across the room and opened a built-in cabinet. 'What would you like to drink? Sherry? Cocktail?'

Toni swallowed. She wanted nothing, just to sink through the floor and disappear from sight. 'A sherry, please,' she said, and it came out like a croak.

He brought the drink to her. She was still sitting on the arm of the chair; she felt she could never stand up again. Then he went back and poured a drink for himself. 'Cheers/ he murmured, and tossed it off in one gulp.

The door opened at that moment and a pretty, white-haired woman came in with a tray. 'May I set the table for you, Mr. Lawrence? Your steaks are being grilled now. They won't be more than a few minutes.' She carried the tray across the room, with a smile towards Toni. She hesitated, blinked, and put down the tray rather suddenly on the table. Toni was beginning to get used to that expression on people's faces - people who had known Midge and must have wondered if they were seeing a ghost.

Gray had no doubt seen the little episode but didn't intend to do any explaining. 'Thanks, Mrs. Wood, you're a marvel,' he said. 'Toni, meet our valued housekeeper, who has the happy knack of turning a service flat into a home. Mrs. Wood, this is Miss Warren, Mr. Benjamin's niece, who is joining the firm.'

Mrs. Wood murmured something appropriate, took Toni's outstretched hand and went out, still with that faintly dazed expression.

'She seems a nice person,' Toni said, into the awkward silence that followed.

Gray glanced at her. 'Yes,' he said. 'She is.' He threw himself into a chair on the opposite side of the room from her and picked up the evening paper. If she hadn't known that it was very unlikely, Toni might have imagined that he was feeling uncertain of himself. That would make two of us, she thought wryly.

She spread the cloth on the table, arranged cutlery and glasses and went back and sipped her sherry slowly. They said that if you took a drink in very small sips it didn't have any effect on you, and she needed a clear head to deal with any further surprises that this surprising evening might produce. Gray didn't raise his eyes from the paper until Mrs. Wood arrived with their meal. When they were alone again he came over and placed a chair for Toni. 'Rather a masculine type meal, I'm afraid,' he said. 'I hope it's all right for you.' He took a chair opposite. 'It was rather short notice for Mrs. W.'

'It looks delicious,' Toni said politely.

They applied themselves to the food in silence. The steak was tender and perfectly cooked. It was a pity that Toni didn't seem able to taste it. Her discomfort increased moment by moment, and by the time she reached the pineapple she began to imagine that she could hear herself eating, like a sheep champing at grass in a field, she thought, repressing a nervous giggle.

'Cheese?' inquired Gray, pushing the plate towards her.

She looked at the dry, crunchy biscuits and shuddered. 'No, thanks.' She turned thankfully to pour out coffee from the electric percolator.

When they had finished the meal Gray piled the dishes on to the tray and carried it to the outside landing. Coming back he rang down to the housekeeper. 'Excellent meal, Mrs. Wood. Thank you. I've put the remains outside for collection any time it's convenient.' He settled himself in one of the easy chairs while Toni sat uncomfortably near the edge of the other one.

'Tired?' Gray inquired.

'N-no, not a bit,' she said hastily.

He looked at her thoughtfully. 'I suppose we'd better discuss arrangements for the night. It seems somewhat superfluous, when there's a perfectly good double bed in there. Would you consider sharing it with me?'

Now that the question had been asked she found her ebbing strength of mind returning. 'Certainly not,' she said flatly.

'H'm, more or less what I expected. Perhaps it's as well, i6<as I promised Benjamin I'd look after you.' His eyes narrowed into a smile. 'I'm not sure whether sharing a bed with you would come into that category or not.'

'*Not*,' said Toni. If he were going to flirt round the matter then she could do the same.

'Pity!' he mused. 'We shall just have to think of something else, then. I couldn't possibly turn you out on a night like this.' He stood up and came across the room towards her. She drew back into her chair, but he merely walked past her to the window and pulled the curtain aside. 'Yes, I thought I heard rain. It's absolutely pouring down.' He paused, pondering the matter with a finger beside his mouth. 'Well, how would it be if you have the bed and I kip down on the floor in here?'

'No,' said Toni.

'You wouldn't trust me?'

'No,' she said again. She didn't know the rules of this game and she was playing it by ear.

He went back to his chair. 'You're a girl who just keeps on saying "No", are you?'

He looked down at the carpet and then up again, straight into her eyes. 'Would you consider marrying me?' he said.

She moved her shoulders impatiently. 'If this is a game, I think it's a pretty silly one,' she said crossly.

'It isn't a game,' he said, very deep.

Toni put a hand to her throat. 'You can't be serious.' But she saw that he was. If she said Yes, then he wouldn't have to find anywhere to go for the night, would he? He'd be able to do as he pleased, with no worries about being disloyal to Benjamin. Her heart began to beat thickly. He'd take it as far as marriage, then? He would live in a fantasy world, with herself playing the part of his adored Midge. She wouldn't even have to put on an act, it would be enough that she would be there, looking as she did, the image of Midge.

He was watching her; she could almost believe he could read her thoughts. 'I'm perfectly serious,' he said quietly.

She stared at him, her face pale.: 'Then - why?'

He leaned forward *in* his chair, hands clasped loosely, arms resting along his knees\* He might have been explaining some point in a business discussion.: 'I admit that I had no intention of marrying again - ever. But now you've come on the scene things have changed somewhat. Now I can see certain - advantages to both of us if we were to marry.'

'Advantages?' Her voice rose to a squeak.: 'I never heard anything so - so cold-blooded in my life!'

He smiled at her, that narrowed, devastating smile that turned her bones to water.: 'Oh, Toni, my sweet child, surely you know me better than to accuse me of being cold-blooded.: Bear with me, I'm trying desperately to keep this thing on a level of control; At this moment it's just about all I can do to stay on the opposite side of the room. If I came near you - if I touched you again - well, I'm not saying I could go on behaving like a perfect little gentleman.' He drew in a deep breath and said, 'You know damned well I'm not cold-blooded, Toni; And I get the feeling that neither are you,' he added slowly and meaningly.

Her cheeks burned and she dragged her eyes away from that intense gaze. 'We're not talking about the same thing,' she said, speaking with difficulty,- 'I couldn't marry without love.'

'Love!' he said in an odd tone.: 'Suppose you tell me what you mean by love?'

She didn't raise her eyes. 'Why should I? You wouldn't understand.'

'Try me and see,' he said quietly.

There was a long pause. Toni kept her eyes on her hands, tightly clasped before her. Then she said, 'Perhaps love means something different to a woman. I'd have to be loved not just for - for—' She broke off helplessly, but he didn't speak, or help her out.

After a while she went on, more firmly, 'Uncle Benjamin told me about a gemstone that could be manufactured nowadays. It looks almost exactly like a diamond, it has all the fire of a real diamond, but actually it can never be anything more than an imitation. If I married you that's how it would be. The - the fire would be there, but underneath there'd be nothing real. It would be just a pretence - a sham. I'm sorry, I can't explain it any better.'

The silence that followed her words went on and on. It felt dense and solid, like something you could touch. Then Gray stood up. 'You've explained very well,' he said with a shrug. 'And now, the best thing for me to do is to remove myself and leave you in possession of the flat for the night.'

She didn't know what she had expected. Anger, perhaps, or the persuasion that men use to convince women. Or even an arrogant, masculine reliance on his own irresistible power to take what he wanted. She certainly hadn't expected this offhand, almost uninterested acceptance of her answer. She felt tears pricking behind her eyes. What had gone wrong to make the evening end like this - with something that was very near to the hostility he had shown her at first?

He had gone into the bedroom, and now he came out carrying an air-travel satchel. 'I keep a bag packed for emergencies,' he explained.

'But - but I can't turn you out of your own flat like this,' she said in a small voice. 'Couldn't I go to a hotel or something?'

'At this time of night, with no luggage? Not a hope.- Anyway, I've no intention of spending the rest of the evening on the phone trying to get you a room somewhere. No, you'll have to stay here. You'll find clean sheets on the bed - help yourself to anything you need, including my pyjamas if you can bring yourself to wear them. And there's a stock of new toothbrushes in the bathroom cupboard,'

'But where will you go?' she faltered.

His smile was mocking, ironic. 'Don't concern yourself on my account, at this late juncture. I shall have no difficulty in finding myself a bed for the night.' He picked up his overcoat and walked to the door. 'Good night, Toni, I won't bother you again,' he said, and went out.

He had gone to Marsha, of course. To Marsha, who was warm and sympathetic. To Marsha, with her fascinating, gurgling laugh, low and intimate, with her subtle drift of perfume. To Marsha, who wouldn't torment him by reminding him of what he had lost, but who would be a solace and a consolation. Toni saw it all happening - Gray coming out of the cold, wet night, to ring a flat bell somewhere. Marsha opening the door, smiling softly—

The room was warm, but Toni began to shiver. She'd done the right thing, surely, in sending him away, the thing that the whole of her upbringing, backed by that independence she had inherited from her father, prompted her to do. Why, then, should she feel so utterly lost and desolate?

She began to pace restlessly about the room, trying not to face the moment when she would have to answer that question. But the answer, when she could avoid it no longer, was so shattering that she stopped short, pressing her hand to her mouth to stop herself crying out.

Against all sense and reason, she was crazily, blindly, in love with Gray Lawrence, and she had sent him away to another woman.

## CHAPTER NINE

TONI spent the night in one of the armchairs, huddled into it like a small, hunted animal. She was deadly tired, but she slept only fitfully, waking every hour or so to misery like a heavy weight inside her. As the light was beginning to creep in round the edges of the curtains she fell into a deep sleep, only to be disturbed, after what seemed like about five minutes, by the warbling note of the telephone. Her heart thudding painfully, she dragged herself out of the chair, but it was only the police, asking for Gray.

She pushed back her tousled hair, glanced at the electric clock and saw that it was nearly nine o'clock. 'I'm sorry, Mr. Lawrence isn't here at present.' Secretary-like, she added automatically, 'Can I give him a message?'

'Will you ask him to ring the police station and ask for Sergeant Brown, please.' The policeman sounded weary; Toni wondered if he had been awake most of the night too.

'Yes, I'll do that. Thank you. Good-bye.' She wrote the message on the telephone pad. Then, on impulse, she picked up the pencil again and added, 'I'm returning to Whiteways by train. Toni.' Nothing made any sense at the moment, but staying in London seemed to make less sense than anything else.

Ten minutes later she closed the door of the flat behind her, walked down the stairs and out on to the Embankment. There was a stiff breeze blowing from the river, and after the centrally heated flat the air felt cold, but she gulped in great mouthfuls of it and felt better. She crossed the road and began to walk. You could think better when you were walking, and she needed to think. But when she found herself at Westminster Bridge, some time later, she discovered that she hadn't been thinking; she had been totally occupied in feeling, which wasn't at all the same thing. She stood for a moment, looking out over the slate-coloured river, at the hurrying passers-by, pale-faced, heads down against the wind. The scene echoed her depression. She turned and went towards the subway entrance. She would get back to Whiteways as soon as she could. After that? She didn't know, but at least, there, she would be with people who really cared about her.



The journey turned out less complicated than she had expected. She rang up from Paddington when she had found out the time of her train, and Benjamin's chauffeur was waiting for her, with the car, when the train arrived. This, she thought with a faint smile as she climbed in, was what it meant to be Miss Antonia Warren. At the moment it didn't seem to mean very much to her. But it was good to be with her mother again, and Benjamin. They were so glad to see her, so interested to hear all that had happened since she left. She was able to reassure Benjamin that Gray seemed to think that everything was up to date for the Karen Leiner show next week. Then she told them about the theft of the car, and Gray having to find somewhere to put up for the night, while he lent her his flat in Chelsea.

'How kind and thoughtful of him!' her mother exclaimed, and Toni glanced quickly at her, but there was no hint of irony. Her mother would always believe the best of everybody. And Benjamin smiled his gentle smile and added, 'He promised to look after you, my dear, he knows how much you mean to me.'

Affection like this went straight through her defences. She had been dry-eyed all night, but now the tears pricked behind her eyelids. She sighed, looking round the big, comfortable hall, and said, 'It's good to be home.'

'And that,' said Benjamin, polishing his eyeglass, 'is quite the nicest thing you could say.'

'It's true,' said Toni.

And it was true. Whiteways had become home in an incredibly short space of time. But how, she wondered, could she go on being part of the family, part of the business, when the situation between Gray and herself seemed to be getting more and more hurtful to both of them, for quite different reasons?

That afternoon she wandered round to the stables to look at the foal. As she got near she saw Dominic; he was whistling to himself as he rubbed down the big black horse, Lucifer. She watched him for a moment before he saw her, and again thought of Adrian. Dominic had the same healthy, open-air look, the same thick fair hair. From this angle, in his riding breeches and

Aran sweater, he might have *been* Adrian, the one who'd held her first dream of love.

He turned and saw her. 'Toni - you're back! Super!' He gave Lucifer a slap on his rump and pushed him into his stall. Then he bolted the bottom half of the door and came over and hugged her. 'I was thinking about you at that very moment.'

'Don't give me that!' Her own spirits rose a little to match his. It was easy to fall back into the old light-hearted exchanges. 'You're looking very pleased with yourself,' she added.

'Oh, I am indeed. Things are moving apace in the lil' ole world of Dominic Finch. The way to the wide open spaces seems to be clearing at last.'

'Really? How so?'

He folded his arms, leaning back against the stable door, his eyes very blue and twinkling. 'You remember I said I wouldn't consider Australia until Ann had some plan for the future?'

She nodded and he went on, 'Well, it looks like her plan's going to work out too, rather unexpectedly soon. Which will leave me free to go right ahead. Look, sweetheart, I've got some chores to finish here. You go over to the cottage and have a natter with Ann. She'd love to see you, I know. Apparently she thinks that you helped to straighten out the path for her in some way.'

'*Me?*' Toni stared unbelievably. 'I haven't done a thing.'

He shrugged. 'I wouldn't know. Anyway, you go and talk to her yourself and I'll be over just as soon as I'm through here. Tell Ann to have a cuppa and a toasted teacake ready and waiting for me by four o'clock, there's a love.'

'I'll do that,' Toni said, and turned away, but he called her back.

He rubbed his cheek with the back of one strong hand. 'Have you - have you given any more thought to what I asked you on Boxing Day, Toni?'

She didn't pretend to misunderstand. 'Frankly no,' she said, and smiled. 'I put all that down to your celebration with the Young Farmers.'

He shook his head vehemently. 'Not a bit of it. That outing merely gave me the courage to ask you. I think we'd have a grand life out in Australia together, Toni. I suppose it's awful cheek on my part to propose to Benjamin Warren's niece, but I can't help that. I've fallen pretty hard for you, love.'

She hadn't expected this and she hadn't any answer ready. She looked at Dominic, so like Adrian with his boyish charm, his teasing mouth, his energy and enthusiasm. Was it possible to breathe new life into a dream that had died?

She put a hand on the rough woollen sleeve of his sweater. 'Thank you for asking me, Dominic,' she said gently, 'but I'm afraid it isn't really on.'

He pulled a very wry face and the twinkle had gone from his eyes. 'O.K.,' he said, 'don't look so apologetic, Toni, I never really believed I could be so lucky. But I had to try. Let me know if you change your mind, that's all.'

He turned back to the horses and Toni walked away towards the cottage. It would have been such an easy solution - to go off with Dominic to the other end of the world, where she and Gray wouldn't ever see each other again. She smiled to herself wryly. Two proposals in two days! And she had refused both of them! She had certainly started something when she had agreed to apply for the job at Warrens!

Ann greeted her like a friend of years' standing. She looked younger, happier, and her big brown eyes were shining. 'Lovely to see you, Toni. Come in and sit down, I've so much to tell you.'

What she had to tell was all about Keith and herself, as Toni had guessed it would be. It was easy to follow the story as Ann told it - how they had met at the school and been vitally aware of each other at the very beginning; how they had both resisted the attraction because Keith was married; how in the end they had admitted it.

'If there had been children, or if Keith's wife had really cared for him, I think I'd have tried to tear myself away and never see him again,' Ann said. 'I hope I would have done. But there are no children and he and his wife have been living a cat-and-dog existence for a long time. She inherited quite a lot of money and she wanted him to give up his art teaching job. She had big ideas and she tried to nag him into going to London, or abroad, and live the way *she* wanted. But Keith has integrity - artistic integrity - and he wouldn't agree, and she made terrible rows about it all the time. You've no idea what hell she made for him, but he's a loyal person and he stuck it for years - until he met me and we fell in love. Even then he couldn't bring himself to leave her - until that day you saw him here and he mistook you for me - remember? That really was the turning point. It made him see that we couldn't go on as we were, that it wasn't fair to me, that soon people would get to know, and there would be talk at school.'

'But—' Toni began, but Ann waved a hand. 'Oh, he didn't think *you* would give us away. I said I knew you wouldn't and he trusted my judgment. But it opened his eyes to what could happen and it made him take the decision that there had to be a break. There was a terrible scene, of course, when he told her, but in the end she went off to friends in London and left him. So - he'll get his freedom as soon as he can, and then we'll be married. Oh, Toni, you've no idea. I feel as if an enormous weight has been lifted off my back.' There were tears in her eyes.

'I'm so very glad for you,' Toni said sincerely. 'I thought there must be something to make you look so - sort of, inwardly sad.'

Ann blew her nose hard and said, 'It's been difficult, but I believe the worst's over now for both of us. Women can be absolute beasts to men, can't they? It's always the man who is blamed, when there's another woman involved. People don't seem to take into account the absolute hell a woman can make for a man. Like poor Gray—' She stopped, looking uncertainly at Toni.

It took a moment or two for Toni to take in the full meaning of the words. Then she said slowly, 'But I thought it was an idyllic marriage - that Gray has never got over losing Midge.'

'Did he tell you that himself?' Ann asked wryly.

'Well, no, I suppose he didn't. It was Uncle Benjamin who said so.' She tried to remember. 'I think he said that Gray had sustained a shattering loss and it had made him bitter and difficult.' She smiled thinly. 'That certainly fitted in with the way he treated me.'

Ann said thoughtfully, 'I knew Midge well. We grew up together, although she never forgot she was the little princess. Benjamin Warren brought her up; she was all that was left of his beloved family. He gave her every single thing she ever wanted. He indulged her, and spoiled her, and I'm sure he never saw her as she really was - utterly selfish. When she married Gray I wondered if she would change, but she didn't. She used to boast to me how she would twist Gray round her little finger, how he adored her and would give her anything. She thought she could manipulate him as she had always manipulated Benjamin.' Ann smiled grimly. <sup>£</sup>'But I guess Gray was a different proposition entirely. Knowing Midge, I could imagine what went on. In fact once she told me - boasted to me - that she had her own way of making him do what she wanted. It was just about the rottenest thing a woman can do to a man.'

'You mean—?' Toni whispered. She had to be sure.

Ann looked at her. 'I mean she would - withhold her favours. Midge never cared about people - she *used* them. She even used Dominic like that sometimes, when there wasn't a more sophisticated man of her own world to use.' She smiled. 'Nicky didn't really play up very satisfactorily - he isn't the type for that sort of ploy - but it made bad feeling between him and Gray.'

'Yes,' said Toni. 'I noticed that.' All sorts of things were falling into place now. 'And Benjamin never knew what was going on?'

Ann shook her head. 'I'm sure he didn't. Midge was perfection itself in his eyes and she took good care it would stay like that. And, knowing Gray, I'm sure he would never have let the old man guess how things were. Over the years he just got grimmer and more silent, and Midge more brittle and reckless and show-off. One of her - men friends was a racing driver. That was when she bought the car that killed her. She wanted something superbly powerful and stunning and impressive, and in the end she found something that even she couldn't handle.'

Toni was silent, her mind spinning, unable to adjust to a situation that had suddenly turned inside out.

Ann was looking at her, frowning a little. 'Is all this going to bother you?' she said anxiously. 'Maybe I shouldn't have talked. I just had the feeling you ought to know - that it might be important to you.' She laughed. 'Dominic's always teasing me about being psychic.'

'It is important to me,' Toni said slowly. 'But - forgive me, Ann, I don't want to talk about it now.' She stretched her shoulders to relieve the tension that had crept into them. 'Would you think it awfully rude if I didn't stay any longer?'

Ann gave her a quick glance and stood up. 'Of course not. But you *will* come again soon?'

Toni promised, said good-bye to Ann, and walked out into the bare, wintry garden. But she didn't turn back to the house; instead she crossed over the drive and found a path into the fields. It was rough and stony, and muddy in places, but she trudged along, hardly noticing her surroundings. One thought possessed her mind: Gray *hadn't* been living a fantasy, pretending she was Midge. He hadn't adored Midge, he'd been desperately unhappy with her, if Ann was right, and she had the strongest feelings that Ann *was* right. Her heart was suddenly filled with pity for him. Her own coming on the scene must have created an almost intolerable situation for him; he had been like a man fighting an elusive shadow, lashing out wildly in all directions. Perhaps he had imagined that by asking her to marry him he would somehow manage to lay the ghost. Dimly she began to feel that she understood, but only dimly, for you could never know exactly what went on inside another human being. Her love for him, deepened now with compassion, seemed to fill her whole being, and overflowed at last into tears. She stumbled along, weeping for Gray's unhappiness, for her own unhappiness, for the seeming hopelessness of the situation.

She walked on and on, blindly, and there was only one thought that stood out in her mind. She loved Gray, and she would do anything for him. But because of her resemblance to another girl she could never bring him anything but confusion and unhappiness. Vaguely she was aware that it had

begun to rain, but the weather matched her mood: the bare fields, the leafless hedges, the depths of winter emptiness.

Then, out of nowhere, the solution occurred to her, and it stopped her short in her tracks. If she married Dominic and went out to Australia with him, Gray would never be troubled by her again. She wouldn't be cheating Dominic, she could give him all he asked of her. And perhaps, in time, she would learn to love him. Her mother would miss her, but she wouldn't stand in her way, and she was happy here at Whiteways, looking after the house and Benjamin. If the workroom were moved here she would have plenty of scope for her organizing talents. And Benjamin? He would be a little sad, but the years had brought him wisdom and the painful knowledge that you cannot keep the ones you love for ever. Besides, there were planes. Visiting Australia was no impossible undertaking, in these days of jet flight.

Yes, thought Toni, with a sudden easing of tension that follows the making of a decision, that was the only way out and she would take it. She would find Dominic now, and tell him.

She turned and began to run. She must do this quickly, she must commit herself straight away, or her heart would fail her. On and on she ran, panting a little, head down against the driving rain, holding the collar of her coat huddled against her neck.

Days later, when she thought about it, she decided that it was probably inevitable that she should catch her foot on the stony, uneven ground, and go sprawling forwards on to her stomach on the muddy earth. But it was sheer bad luck that it was a mass of tough, protruding roots that she tripped on, and that, in falling, her foot and ankle should have become entangled so that she couldn't extricate herself.

At first she didn't believe that she was really stuck. In a minute or two she would find just the right movement that would set her foot free. Gingerly she wriggled her leg this way and that, but it remained firmly wedged.

This was too absurd. She must be able to get back to Whiteways, to see Dominic, to tell him what she had decided. She struggled to turn her body so that she could support herself on one elbow and at least see what it was that

was holding her foot. But she could only move a short way to the left, and when she tried to roll over in the other direction ' i her body was locked firmly against her right leg. Finally, in desperation, she pushed up on her hands, arms bent, and straining with all her might she pulled forward along the ground like a snake. For one moment she thought that whatever it was that was holding her foot was giving way a fraction. Then something snapped back and she was held more firmly than ever.

She collapsed to the ground, sobbing under her breath with helpless rage at the stupidity of the situation. Her face was stiff with plastered mud and the taste of wet earth was in her mouth. She tried to wipe it clear, but her hands were covered with mud too. The rain poured down relentlessly. It had soaked through her clothes and was running in icy trickles along her back. She didn't even know where she was, except that she was out in the cold, wet, empty fields, and she was well and truly trapped, just as surely as some wretched animal might have been trapped, in the bad old days of cruel steel snares.

Time ceased to mean anything. Toni lay there helplessly. Now and then she tried again to free herself, but each effort was a little weaker than the last, and eventually she stopped trying. Now and then she called out, but there was no sound except the constant drip of the rain to answer. How long before they missed her at Whiteways? And even when they did, how would they know where to look for her? She started to shiver convulsively. You could die from exposure, couldn't you? That would solve the problem, she thought, hers and Gray's, and she began to giggle hysterically.

At some time she must have passed out, for when she opened her eyes it was almost dark. She lifted her head weakly. In the distance was a tiny light, perhaps the light of Ann's cottage. She had a sudden picture of the cosy room, the fire, the warmth, and she began to cry again, soundlessly, the tears running down her muddy cheeks, mingling with the rain.

Then she saw another light, a moving light, getting nearer, heard a voice calling, Toni - Toni—'

She drew in a deep, sobbing breath. 'Here - I'm here—' she quavered. 'Oh, please come - *please—!*'



By some miracle it was Gray's voice that answered, Gray who knelt down beside her and touched her cold, wet cheek. 'It's all right, Toni, I'm here now.' The light of the torch was moving over her. She could feel something hacking, tearing at whatever it was that bound her ankle. Then, with the utter relief of being freed at last, she rolled over on to her back and lay speechless, half unconscious, until she was lifted in strong arms and carried towards the small distant light.

'Whatever made you do it, Toni dear? Walking over the fields in the rain, all on your own?' Mrs. Warren fussed round the bedroom, straightening the pillows, adjusting the heat of the radiator. 'Benjamin and I got so worried about you. First of all we thought you were at Ann's, and then, when I went over to the cottage and found that you'd left an hour or more since, I didn't know *what* to think.'

Toni laid her head back and smiled. After a steaming bath and a mug of hot milk generously laced with brandy she felt comfortably hazy. Her skin had a warm glow, her hair, washed free of mud, lay on the pillow drying into a satiny russet shimmer. It was good to feel human again, good to know she wasn't going to die, even if it would have solved her problem.

'I was coming back, Mum,' she explained for the umph-teenth time. 'It was just bad luck that my foot got caught in that root.' She didn't mention that she had been running - running wildly and carelessly to find Dominic and tell him she would marry him, to cut through for good the knot that she and Gray Lawrence had found themselves disastrously tied by.

'Well, I still think it was silly of you,' grumbled her mother, releasing her pent-up anxiety in scolding, as parents will. 'Now, I'm going down to make you some supper and you're going to eat up every bit and then have a good sleep, and if you're running a temperature in the morning we'll have the doctor in to look at you.' She went to the door. 'Benjamin will be up to see you soon. He's been anxious too.'

Toni leaned back and closed her eyes. When the knock came on the door she was already drifting into sleep. 'Come in.' She smiled to greet Benjamin, her

eyelids drooping. Then she opened them wide. 'Gray!' She pulled herself up against the pillows. 'I thought it was Uncle Benjamin.'

'He allowed me to be his substitute,' he said. 'Any objection?'

'No, of course not.' She felt ridiculously shy.

He came and sat beside her bed. 'How are you? What's the damage?' His tone was friendly, relaxed. He seemed to have forgotten how they had parted last night. But of course you never knew what Gray was thinking. He didn't give himself away.

'Oh, I'm fine,' she said lightly. 'No real damage - just a chafed and slightly bruised ankle. Mother's applied first aid. And Uncle Benjamin's brandy, plus a hot bath, has provided the rest of the cure. I have you to thank for rescuing me from a very watery grave.' That sounded so disgustingly facetious that she went on nervously, 'I'd no idea you were here. How did you get back? How did you know where to find me?'

He leaned back in his chair. 'Answer to question one, I got back in my car, which an efficient police force discovered for me, abandoned just north of Watford at six-thirty this morning. I came back as soon as I could - because I wanted to talk to you.' At something she saw in his eyes she looked away quickly, the colour rising in her cheeks.

'Answer to question two,' he went on, 'when you weren't here when I arrived I traced you to Ann's cottage, found out the time you left there, and - well, I must admit it took quite a while to track you down. Your mother and Benjamin were out looking too.' He glared at her, suddenly fierce. 'Don't you dare ever go off again like that, young woman!'

'I'm sorry,' she said weakly. 'I've been a nuisance.'

'You have indeed.' There was a long pause, then he said, 'I talked to Ann.'

'Oh,' said Toni.

'And she talked to me. She was rather upset. She thought she might have been indiscreet in discussing my private life with you. I was able to reassure her.'

'Oh,' she said again. 'Good!'

His cool composure left him suddenly. He slapped his hand on the arm of the chair. 'To hell with all this fencing,' he shouted. 'Let's have things clear between us.' He lowered his voice, leaned forward in his chair, and looked intently at her. 'Toni, *why* did you go tearing off into the fields so quickly, after you'd been talking to Ann?'

She moistened her lips. 'I had to think,' she said, very low. 'You see, I'd got everything the wrong way round.' Gathering her courage, she went on, 'Benjamin seemed to like me and want me because I was like Midge. You seemed to dislike and resent me. I thought it was because I was a - a sort of bittersweet reminder of all you had lost. That every time you saw me you remembered how happy you'd been with her. I thought you wanted to - to make love to me so that you could close your eyes and pretend it was her you held in your arms. I hoped that, in time, you'd come to terms with your loss, as people have to, and then maybe we could be friends, and could work together—'

He nodded slowly. 'And then, this afternoon, you found that you'd got it wrong - that Midge wasn't the angel that Benjamin led you to believe? In fact, quite the reverse?'

'Yes,' she said simply. 'Gray - I'm sorry, I didn't understand, but I do now, a little. I can see why it's so painful and intolerable for you to have me around. When I thought I reminded you of - of love and happiness it seemed difficult enough, but possible. But if all I remind you of is frustration and misery, then there's no future for either of us if I stay here, is there? Out there in the fields I came to a decision. I can solve the problem by going away, and that's exactly what I'm going to do.'

'You're going away? And where do you propose to go?' His voice was flat, he sounded almost disinterested.

She made her face smooth and calm with a tremendous effort. 'To the other end of the world. Dominic is going out to Australia. He has asked me to marry him and go out there with him.'

'Do you love him?' His eyes were fixed on hers, those strange, green-flecked eyes that had so disturbed her from that first moment she met them, across an untidy desk in London. She couldn't meet his eyes and tell a deliberate lie. 'I'm sure I will. Dominic's very - very lovable.'

He said, 'Why do you imagine I asked you to marry me last night?'

Her eyes widened. 'I thought—' She stopped, flushing deeply.

'Go on.'

'I thought you were looking for an excuse to share the flat with me for the night, without breaking your promise to Benjamin.'

He said wryly, 'Yes, I suppose I deserve that. What else has that busy little mind of yours been cooking up about me? Come on, let's have the lot.'

There was nothing left now but the stark truth. 'I thought you'd gone to spend the night with Marsha. You two seemed - very friendly.'

'We are,' he agreed. 'Marsha's a great girl. But there's only one man who spends the night with her and that's her husband. His name's Pietro and he's just finished making a film in Rome. He's a great friend of mine - you'll like him. No, in point of fact, I spent the night at my club, cursing myself for having jumped in at the deep end and proposed to you.'

Her mouth drooped. She said in a small voice, 'It didn't matter.'

He said roughly, 'Of course it mattered. It mattered a hell of a lot. I was incredibly clumsy last night. No wonder you turned me down flat!'

'But you weren't serious, so—'

He was very still, watching her. 'I was never more serious in my life. It was the timing that was wrong.'

'Then why did you walk out like that?' She had to step carefully; she couldn't let herself believe what she thought she saw in his eyes.

'Why?' He smiled faintly. 'Have you any idea how devastatingly alluring you can look, young lady? Of course I wanted to stay and plead my case. But I'm only human, my darling, and there we were, alone, in my flat. So all I could do was run, as quickly as possible. Which I did.'

She sat quite still in the white-covered bed, holding her breath, tense, waiting.

Gray said, 'I'm quite certain I'm not as lovable as Dominic, but if you really worked hard on it, do you think you might manage to love me instead? Because I love you, and I need you with me, and I don't think I can go on without you.'

She let out her breath on a long sigh and tears swam into her eyes. She said huskily, 'I won't have to work on it. I've been working hard *not* to love you ever since the first time we met.'

He kicked off his shoes and swung his legs on to the bed beside her and took her into his arms. His hands were infinitely gentle under the filmy froth of her nightdress. She gave him back kiss for kiss, holding him close as his mouth moved over her face to the smooth hollow of her neck. She pressed her cheek against his head and his hair was rough and crisp against her skin.

At last he took her face between his hands and looked deep into her eyes. 'Your eyes are not like hers,' he said. 'Your eyes are true and kind and generous. I think I knew from the very beginning that you weren't like her in any way that matters, but I wouldn't let myself believe it. I'd had to grow a pretty hard shell over the years.' He kissed her again. 'You've managed to smash that shell in weeks, my love.'

Then she knew, with a sure knowledge, that she had nothing more to fear from the past. Some day, perhaps, if he wished, he would talk to her about it, but she would never need to question or probe.

He slipped back into his chair, pulled on his shoes again, and from an inside pocket drew out a small leather box. With a grin he said, 'Let us, for once, be formal and correct. I took the opportunity of calling at Bond Street for this before I left,' he paused meaningly and added, 'as a token of good faith.' He flicked open the lid to reveal a ring, a single, brilliant-cut diamond that flashed its fire before her dazzled eyes, glittering in dancing rainbow colours in the light of the bedside lamp.

'It's a real diamond,' Gray said. 'I don't like imitations either.'

Toni had lost the power of speech. She stared wordlessly at the beautiful thing as Gray slipped it on her finger. It fitted exactly. 'Do you like it? Will it do?' he asked.

She let her head fall weakly back against the pillows. 'Yes, oh yes,' she whispered, and couldn't hold back the tears any longer, for it had been an exhausting day.

Gray mopped her eyes until the smile came back into them. Then he kissed her finger, with his ring on it. He lifted his head, his eyes dancing wickedly. 'Such a pity,' he mused, tracing the outline of her body under the silky bedcover, 'here you are at last, where I've dreamed of having you, and you look so fragile that I must content myself with kissing your hand.' His voice grew deeper, the green-flecked eyes darker, 'But just you wait, my love, just you wait! I know of a small hotel, with a view over a lake, and spring flowers in the meadows all around—'

Joy flooded through her, dispelling her tiredness, filling her with life and energy. She sat up, holding out both her hands to him. She wanted to give and give, to withhold nothing, to make up to him for those other years.

Close in his arms, she murmured, 'It sounds like heaven. What's the earliest day the spring flowers come into bloom around those parts?'