



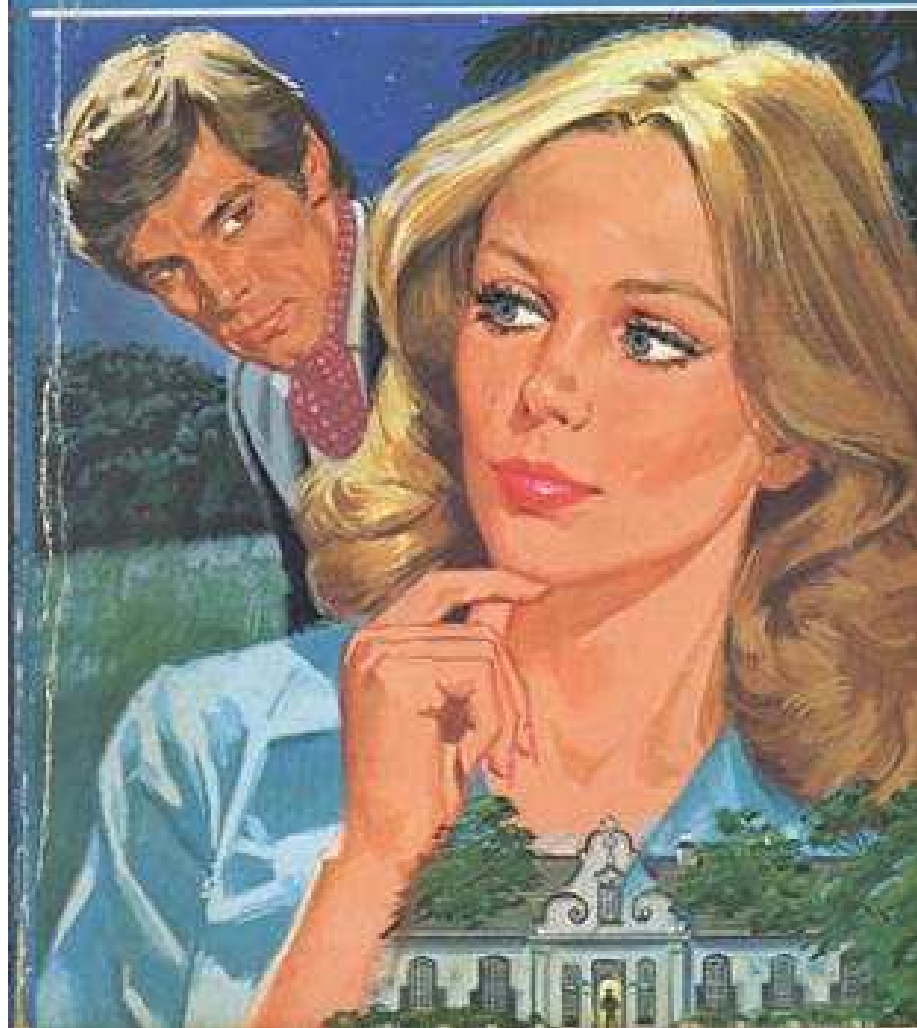
Harlequin Romance

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Where the South Wind Blows

ANNE HAMPSON



WHERE THE SOUTH WIND BLOWS

Anne Hampson

"I will never fall in love again!"

Melanie had had enough. For the second time in her life, she had lost the man she loved to her glamorous but unscrupulous sister, Romaine.

She wanted nothing more to do with love, or with her sister. So Melanie flew off to South Africa, out of Romaine's life--and into Luke Shadwell's.

Against her better judgment Melanie found herself falling in love with the grimly attractive Luke. And once again Romaine turned up, prepared to work her usual mischief ...

CHAPTER ONE

To have been jilted once was humiliating enough, but to have it happen a second time was sufficient to make even a girl like Melanie become embittered. She stared with disbelieving eyes at Robin, her lovely features drawn with pain.

'It isn't true,' she whispered. 'You don't mean it, do you?'

The young man shifted from one foot to the other, a deep frown on his face.

'It's just one of those things, Melanie. Far better that it's happened now than when we were married.'

She swallowed, but the lump in her throat remained. Why make any effort at all to speak? She had been through all this before—and after that experience she had vowed never to let a man hurt her again. Yet here she was, four years later, experiencing the same pain in her heart, the same sense of loss and failure, the same sense of humiliation.

And the girl who had taken Robin from her was none other than the one who had taken Giles—her own sister.

'I must go.' She looked at him just once before, turning on her heel, she left the hotel lounge in which she and Robin had so often met.

She went down to the powder room, intent on applying a little colour to her cheeks, but on searching in her handbag found that she had left her blusher at home. She took out a comb and drew it lightly through her honey-blond hair, making a cold and calculated assessment of her looks as she did so. High cheekbones and a clear pale skin, a wide and generous mouth, eyes that matched the cornflower blue of her suit. She was passable, she told herself, but Romaine was beautiful—Romaine who from her early teens had been able to take her choice of the boys at the grammar school which she and Melanie attended.

With a deep sigh Melanie put away the comb and, closing her handbag, went up into the foyer of the hotel. The bus stopped just along the road and she was lucky enough to arrive at the stop just in time to catch the one going to Warford. Why Warford? Her aunt lived there—Aunt Cissy who would comfort her....

'Darling!' Aunt Cissy threw her arms around Melanie even before she had stepped into the hall. 'My love—but how wonderful to see you! Bless you, child, for remembering to come and see an old woman like me. Now that gadabout sister of yours hasn't been to see me since the day of her birthday—no, I tell a lie; she came on Christmas Eve and brought me a tablet of soap someone had given her at the office—for a Christmas present, of course. It stank! I shredded it up and used it in the washing machine. She got nothing in return, so I don't expect she'll come this Christmas Eve. What am I rambling on about? Come in, love, and tell me all your news. How is that charming fiance of yours? You haven't much longer to wait for the great day, have you? About six weeks, isn't it?'

By this time Melanie had managed to get into the living-room, and she turned to her aunt as the old lady followed closely behind.

'It's all finished, Auntie...' And although she had meant to hold on to her control Melanie found herself weeping on Aunt Cissy's shoulder.

'My love! Oh, my dear, dear love—not again!'

'Robin's fallen in love with Romaine.'

'Not again!' repeated her aunt and then, hastily, 'What I mean is—Romaine hasn't stolen your fiancé a second time?'

'It's true, Auntie.' Melanie took the handkerchief offered and dried her eyes. 'I've just been with Robin and he told me that he and Romaine are getting married as soon as Romaine's divorce goes through.'

'The bitch!' declared Aunt Cissy, her pale grey eyes blazing. 'Oh, but I wish she were here at this moment ! I'd slap her face, believe me!'

'I'll get over it, Auntie.' The handkerchief changed hands again and Melanie sat down on the shabby couch under the window. 'But I'll tell you this: no man—I repeat, *no man* will ever have the chance of doing this to me again!'

'I can't say that I blame you for feeling bitter, dear, but on the other hand I can't imagine you remaining single all your life. It's no fun, pet, and so once you get over this you must begin looking around again.'

'Never!'

'I wonder,' mused her aunt, bypassing this vehement exclamation, 'how Giles is feeling now? I'll wager he regrets throwing you over for a girl who was going to want a divorce so soon.'

'I hope he's suffering!'

'Darling, this is not you at all,' protested her aunt, looking into her tear-stained face. 'Giles was such a nice boy.'

So was Robin, according to her aunt.

'You like all men,' returned Melanie, but her aunt instantly denied this.

'There's one or two I don't like at all,' she said forcibly, 'and one of those as I've said is that arrogant nephew of my cousin's—you know,

Luke Shadwell, who grows trees or cereals or something in South Africa?'

'I've never met him, you know that. Has he ever been to England?'

'A couple of times, when you were too small to notice. He was a youngster then, working for his father. Then the old man popped off and Luke was suddenly rich—farming in a big way, so Gertrude tells me.'--*

'Aunt Gertie's coming home, you were saying the last time I was here?'

'Yes; you'll like my cousin, Melanie. However, enough of that for the present. Let's have a cup of tea, shall we?'

'Thank you, Auntie. That'll be nice.' Melanie rose at once to follow the old lady into the kitchen. 'Aunt Gertie lived with Luke and his father, didn't she?' Melanie was talking in order to forget her pain, talking about people whom she had never met but had heard about from time to time when she had visited Aunt Cissy, her mother's sister, who was the eldest of a family of nine. But they were a scattered family, most of them having settled abroad, and Aunt Cissy was the only one of her mother's family with whom Melanie had ever been close. A widow, she was a very sprightly seventy-year-old and, in her own words, 'game for anything'.

'That's right— Biscuits, love?' And when Melanie shook her head, 'Don't let this darned business send you off your food, sweetie. Have a biscuit, just to please me.'

'All right, I will.' Melanie was putting crockery and spoons on the tray, while her aunt was making the tea. 'Why is Aunt Gertie coming home?'

'Can't stand the place any more—that's what she says, but I'm of the mind that she's had enough of that nephew of hers. Darned autocrat, he is! Thinks he's the only man in Africa who knows about growing citrus fruits!'

'Citrus fruits?' frowned Melanie, preparing to take the tray into the living-room. 'I thought you said he grew cereals?'

'And trees.'

'I imagined the trees were for timber?'

'He grows anything, but he does have a lot of citrus groves.'

'How long has he owned the farm?'

'How long since his father died? About six or seven years--' The old lady frowned in thought, the teapot lid poised above the pot itself. 'Luke was twenty-four and Gertrude mentioned in one of her letters recently that he'd just had his thirty-first birthday, so he's been in charge for seven years—yes, that'll be about right!' The lid was placed on the pot and Aunt Cissy followed her niece into the other room. 'Now isn't this cosy ...? Oh, my love, I do keep on forgetting your sorrow. Try to forget the wretched boy—he can't be worth having anyway!' Melanie looked away, and began pouring the tea. 'As for that madam of a sister of yours—well, all I can say is that the way she's going on she'll have had at least a dozen husbands by the time she's my age! How old is she now?'

'Twenty-six.'

'Ah, yes; two years older than you. I tend to forget her age because I never buy her a present on her birthday. I don't know what your mother would say to her daughter's wicked ways.'

'Nor Father,' sighed Melanie, wishing she had parents to whom she could pour out her unhappiness. To live with someone would help, too, but Melanie lived alone in a small flat which she had furnished with some of the things she had bought when engaged to Giles. She liked old furniture and had acquired several small pieces which she treasured despite the memories they evoked sometimes when she had sat on her own in the evenings—this before Robin had come into her life and managed to make her forget her vow never to allow herself to be hurt again. Well, this definitely *was* the last time!

'Come again, dear,' urged her aunt when at last Melanie was leaving. 'It's a pity you can't live here, but you'd be too far away from your work.'

'Yes, I'm afraid so. Goodbye, Auntie. Take care of yourself.'

'I make sure about that, my love! As a matter of fact I'm thinking of going on a cruise.'

'You are? But when?'

'Don't know, but I want to do some more travelling before I get old. I'd have gone to see Gertrude if she hadn't been coming home; I did send her a hint in one of my letters recently, but she didn't answer. I suppose it's that fellow, Luke. He'd not want her to have a visitor; it would upset his bachelor existence, I expect.'

'But he's used to having a woman in the house.'

'One woman, yes, but from little bits I've pieced together he wouldn't want two.'

'Would you like to go to Africa, Aunt Cissy?'

'I've always wanted to go to Africa, my dear.'

'Well then, why not ask outright if you can have a holiday with Aunt Gertie, before she comes back—in fact, you could come back together. I'm sure Luke Shadwell won't mind too much.'

'No?' The pale eyes rolled sceptically. 'You don't know him! He's a real menace, from what I can gather from Gertrude's letters.' A deep sigh and then, 'No, I'd better book the cruise; it would be safer.'

'I'll come over on Sunday, if you want me to?'

'If I want you to! Dear child, you must come at the week-ends now that you're not going over to Robin's place. By the way, what are you going to do with all that stuff you've been collecting for your bottom drawer? You want to sell it, child, and take a darn good holiday I'

'I'm in no mood for holidays,' was Melanie's forlorn reply. 'But I shall certainly think about selling all that stuff I've been buying over the past six months.'

It so happened that, the following morning when she was having her cup of coffee in the staff-room, Melanie heard someone say,

'Jean's getting married in three months. Poor girl, she's having a dreadful time trying to buy things for the home; everything's so expensive these days. I do pity the young ones who have to start from scratch.'

Jean worked for the manager and at lunch time Melanie sought her out, with the result that Jean and her fiance came over that very evening and took everything that Melanie had to sell—lovely stainless steel cutlery, a dinner and tea service, cut glass dishes and beautiful table linen. There were sheets and other bedding, kitchen utensils, and, still in store but paid for, a cooker and a washing machine. All these items had been bought by Melanie, while Robin had in store a bedroom suite and all the furniture for the sitting-room and dining-room.

'Is there anything else?' Jean asked eagerly as her fiancé just as eagerly loaded up the car. 'I mean—have you any furniture for sale?'

'No, but my ex-fiance might have,' replied Melanie in a fit of pique. 'I'll write down his address for you.'

And so it was that on the following Sunday Melanie was able to tell her aunt that she had sold practically everything that she had had in her bottom drawer.

'Good for you! There's nothing like making the break clean! And now I have some news for *you*\ I think I shall be going to Africa after all.'

'You will?' Melanie was not all that interested; her mind was on Robin and the happy times he and she had had each week-end. Mrs Lowry, his mother, always invited her and she would arrive on the Friday evening and leave after tea on Sunday, Robin bringing her home in his car. Saturday was usually a shopping day, with Rotyn as eager as she to look around for nice things to buy for their home. Sometimes his mother would come with them and always she would buy some pretty ornament or small kitchen utensil and make them a present of it. In the evening Melanie and Robin would go to the local dance, and on Sunday they would do some gardening in the morning and take a walk in the afternoon. There was nothing exciting in all this, but Melanie was satisfied. Robin was not over-romantic, but once again Melanie was satisfied. Companionship was important and both she and Robin were good conversationalists.

'Yes, dear, I think I'm to realize my ambition after all!' Clearly Aunt Cissy was excited and, feeling rather guilty at her lack of interest, Melanie determinedly put all thoughts of Robin from her and listened with more attention to what her aunt had to say. 'You see, Gertrude had apparently missed my little hint that I was telling you about, but when she read the letter over again she felt rather guilty about the

omission in her answering letter and so she mentioned this to her nephew. And what do you think?

'He said it would be all right if you went over for a holiday.'

'Right first time! Well now, seeing that it appears to be all right with him I shall go off in the morning and book my seat on the aeroplane.' The pale eyes shone and the rather prim little mouth was pursed in a smile. *What a fortunate woman I am! I only wish I had the money to take you along--' Aunt Cissy allowed her voice to come slowly to a stop; she looked sharply at her niece. 'You've sold your bottom drawer. Then why not come with me?'

Melanie stared.

'I can't do that, Auntie. What about my job?'

'We'll only be away for about a month--'

'I can't take a month off—and in any case, if I know you, Auntie, you'll stay on if you find you're liking it. Remember when you went to Canada to stay with Dad's sister?'

'Oh, that? It was different. Luke won't want to harbour me for more than a month at the most. Come on, Melanie, the change'll do you the world of good!'

'No--' Melanie shook her head, but her voice was far less firm than before. 'It's quite impossible. A month? No boss would grant that.'

'Jobs are ten a penny anyway, so what will it matter if he gives you the sack?' Aunt Cissy looked hard at her. 'Didn't you say the other week that this new boss of yours was rather horrid to you all?'

'I did, yes, but--' By now Melanie was weakening rapidly, for the picture of a month's holiday was attractive in that it would surely help

her to forget this terrible ache in her heart. Life was a drag, and there was ever before her the picture of Robin and Romaine going about together; there were the murmurs of sympathy or, worse still, the compassionate or pitying glances of her friends. 'I'll think about it, Auntie,' she found herself saying. 'Yes, I really will.'

'Then think quickly, dear, because I'm off to book my ticket tomorrow, just as I said.'

'I can't make up my mind as quickly as all that. I must find out how I'm to go on at work first.'

Her boss definitely turned down the idea of Melanie's having a month's leave, but after some considerable thought she decided to hand in her notice. She had arranged to telephone her aunt and this she did, in her lunch hour.

'He's accepted, but I must work for a fortnight,' she told her aunt, who could be heard to sigh impatiently.

'All right,' came the voice at last. 'I'll postpone it. But you're sure you can be away by a week next Saturday?'

'Yes, definitely.'

'Very well, then; I'll book the tickets and you can settle up with me later.' A pause and then, after having mentioned the price of the return tickets, 'You have sufficient money? If not, I can perhaps manage to let you have a little--'

'I have plenty, thank you, Aunt Cissy. I've not only got the money for the bottom drawer but also my savings.'

'So you have! Well, believe me, it'll be money well spent, for you'll probably not have an opportunity like this again. Gertrude is returning with us, by the way.'

Having arrived at the airport at seven in the morning, they still had a nine-hour journey by train before transferring to the car which was to meet them.

'It's Gertrude!' cried Aunt Cissy excitedly, waving an enormous handbag in the air. 'And who's that with her--? I do believe it's Luke—yes, by Jove, it is!'

Melanie stared as the tall lithe figure of Luke Shad- well came leisurely towards them. In a flash she had taken in the bronzed face, lean and long, the dark brown hair waving at the front and sprinkled with a lighter colour at the temples—the result of the sun, she surmised. The square and massive shoulders, the arrogant set of the head upon them, the swing of an arm while the other hand was in his pocket. All this she absorbed, but when he came closer she examined the eyes, unable to determine their colour, for one moment she thought they were brown, the next yellow.

Eventually she decided that they were a tawny brown. His mouth, firm but faintly sensuous, was set, unsmiling.

Melanie transferred her gaze to the aunt she had never met. She saw a chubby-faced woman with bright shining cheeks, a faintly hairy chin and thick bushy eyebrows. Her hair was white and thin, her eyes a sort of dull blue. She looked jolly and Melanie liked her on sight.

'We're not really aunt and niece,' she was saying to Luke as the introductions were being made, 'but no matter. Luke, meet my new niece, Melanie Burbank.'

A brown hand was extended and a dark head was inclined slightly. The tawny eyes were mocking, surely? Melanie tilted her chin and decided she disliked the man intensely. Wincing as her hand was

taken, she flashed him a glance; the lean unsmiling countenance had arrogance written all over it.

'Shall we be moving?' he said when it seemed that the two cousins were intending to stay there chatting for the entire evening.

'But of course,' from Aunt Gertie, pushing an arm through that of Aunt Cissy. 'Oh, my, but it's so nice to see you—and you, of course, my dear,' she said over her shoulder to Melanie. 'I've heard such a lot about you from Cis. I know all about your recent disappointment and I do commiserate with you!'

Melanie, aware of the man's eyes upon her, looked away, to where the crowd of Africans jostled to board the train. The platform was open to the sky; palms waved in the breeze, while underneath them flowers bloomed in gay profusion. The small neat town of Rayneburg was well known for its attractive railway station. There were also good shops and a bank. A library, well stocked and run by an English couple, stood proudly on a small rise almost in the centre of the town square; the Jasmine Club occupied another rise just to the east of the square. Here, Aunt Cissy had told Melanie, were held dances and parties—so Gertrude had informed her.

'Can we sit together in the back?' inquired Aunt Cissy of Luke. 'We've such a lot to talk about?'

'Most certainly.'

And so Melanie found herself reluctantly taking her place beside the driver who, without so much as a glance in her direction, let in the clutch and the car slid almost noiselessly from the earthy parking space on which it had been standing.

They had fourteen miles to go and the road was covered with a light brown dust which formed clouds behind the car as it sped along. Melanie already felt uncomfortable, for she considered the welcome

sadly lacking, on Luke Shadwell's part, that was. His aunt's character was very different and Melanie wondered how she had managed to get along with Luke for so long. Melanie had gathered that she was a sort of housekeeper, yet not treated as a servant in any way whatsoever; in fact, she seemed to be quite happy, and Melanie was puzzled as to the reason why she was leaving. It certainly did not appear to be for the reason put forth by Aunt Cissy—that she had had enough of the arrogant Luke Shadwell.

Dusk was falling and suddenly the shapes of some distant kopjes looked weird and ominous in the mysterious gloom that precedes the onset of night. They were passing through a region of bushveld where the colours reminded Melanie of submarine shades— blue-greens glowing, and various shades of indigo. The veld seemed limitless, filled with primitive mystery, a realm that called, yet terrified. She knew a sense of loneliness even while she was with these other people, felt the pressure of a great solitude descending from the void that hovered all around.

From the back of the car chatter persisted and yet Melanie was deaf to it, her whole being affected by the peace of this strange land to which she had come ... with the idea of forgetting, if only for a time, the heartache and humiliation she had so recently suffered. At the very thought of the male sex she turned her head, seeing Luke Shadwell in profile. Cold the lines and chiselled by a classical tool; the head was held rigid, the hands resting lightly on the steering-wheel. Too self-assured by far, she decided. Here was another who would beckon and entice—and then toss aside. Or perhaps he was too self-reliant, too caught up with the more prosaic things of life, and had no time for the vagaries of emotional ties. Cold--She herself would be cold from now on, insensitive to the attractions of men like Giles and Robin ... and Luke Shadwell. Yes, he had attractions; this she could not deny. But not the particular kind that would ever touch her. Other women must have fallen victim to his handsome face and noble bearing; others must have found a challenge in his austerity, and made

attempts to break it down. Was he immune? she wondered. Or did he make full use of what prodigal nature had so abundantly portioned out to him?

That he must inevitably become aware of her fixed attention did not dawn on her until he had actually turned his head. She then moved hers, lowering it and concentrating on a pretty bracelet she wore, a birthday gift from her aunt a month or so ago.

'You're very quiet, Miss Burbank.' The low-toned voice held an off-hand quality which—for no reason that she could explain—piqued her, and she frowned.

'I like being quiet.' She had checked the curtness that threatened to creep into her voice, remembering just in time that she was to be his guest.

'Refreshing—for a woman,' he returned sardonically. 'They more often like to make themselves heard.'

Was he alluding to the chatter coming from the back of the car? Melanie was glad that neither woman had heard what he said.

'You sound as if you haven't a very high opinion of women, Mr Shadwell.' She felt that, could she see his eyes, a gleam of humour would be revealed.

'They're useful, in their place. The trouble is, they do not always know their place.'

Her eyes glinted; she would very much have liked to let him know *her* opinion of *men*. The idea of spending a month in his home was far from attractive and she began to wonder just what their relationship would be by the time she was ready to leave. She rather thought that both he and she would breathe a great sigh of relief when that day arrived.

Darkness was falling softly over the bushveld and with the diminishing twilight rose the moon; shapes and textures changed, like a landscape receding into a mist. The moon, incomplete like a disc that had been bitten into, shed a dim light on the distant mountains and on the forest of trees below them. Then suddenly scudding clouds obscured the light and the mountains were embraced in the gentle cloak of darkness. All seemed wrapped in a sort of primordial peace, and despite her hurts and bitter memories Melanie found herself entering into a state of quiet repose which was still enveloping her when Luke Shadwell's house was eventually reached.

Lights flared from several windows and it was not difficult to pick out the patrician lines of a colonial mansion, nor to visualize the exotic surroundings in which it was set. Figures moved past the windows, woolly-headed figures which, surmised Melanie, were Luke's servants.

She was right; Elizabeth, a plump and smiling African woman, was told to show her to her bedroom, which was on the end of the house, with its view to the west. She would see the sunset from her window, she mused, looking about her as Elizabeth put down her suitcases and began to unpack them without even asking her permission. Melanie shrugged and concluded that this sort of thing must be usual when guests arrived. There was a bathroom off the bedroom and she entered it, its elegance startling her, for she had not expected anything quite so beautiful. The suite was in a colour between mushroom and peach, the carpet and walls in off-white. Gold-plated taps and shower attachments; a stool and matching linen basket completed the picture and Melanie had to admit that, if this had been planned by Luke, then she had to give him credit for having excellent taste.

When Elizabeth had left the bedroom Melanie, having already taken a shower, put on a crisp cotton dress—one of the many she had collected for the honeymoon that had been planned—and a pair of white leather sandals. Her hair shone after the brushing she gave it

and because she envisaged a remark from her aunt if she looked pale, she applied the blusher to her cheeks and a little colour to her lips.

Not beautiful like Romaine ... but passable, she decided, not by any means for the first time. Romaine ... and Robin--In spite of her determination to put them out of her mind she found that the tears were close—too close, and she blinked rapidly in order to prevent them from falling on to her cheeks. But her heart was torn and, going over to the window again, she stared out, only vaguely aware of the bulky baobab trees that formed grotesque shapes in the mothy darkness of the garden. She was totally possessed by misery; it formed a suffocating lump in her throat, and the pain was almost physical as she swallowed over and over again in an effort to dislodge it. Romaine and Robin--Even now, it did not seem credible that her sister had managed a second time to steal her fiance. Her thoughts flew to Giles, and to the scene when he had confessed that it was Romaine whom he really loved and, therefore, would Melanie be a sport and release him without any fuss? Melanie did just that, but it had taken her a long, long time to get over it, especially as she had continually to endure seeing him and her sister together. She had not attended the wedding; she was not having people casting her commiserating glances in between the admiring ones they gave to Romaine, who had looked both beautiful and regal in her flowing white wedding gown. And now the divorce was going through--

A gong sounding from somewhere in the house brought her back to her surroundings and, stepping back, she drew the curtains together and with a last glance in the mirror left the room and went downstairs to the hall. Luke Shadwell was standing there, very smart and handsome in a loose-fitting tropical suit of fine beige linen. She saw something she had not noticed before—the cleft chin and the crinkly fan-lines at the side of his eyes, caused, she surmised, by his narrowing his eyes against the glaring sun. He seemed to have been waiting for her, she realized, and offered an apology for being late.

'You're not late,' he told her courteously. 'We're just going' in to dinner.'

'Aunt Cissy—is she down?'

'Both aunts are down—and still chattering about old times.' He was moving away and she followed. The dining-room, elegant and lit by candles, was smaller than she would have imagined it and she realized that it had been planned for intimacy of atmosphere rather than for the accommodation of large numbers of people. Here again she had secretly to admit to his good taste, for everything was delightfully blended—the damask walls and the thick-pile rugs on the polished block floor, the Edwardian-type dining chairs and table, the matching sideboard on which were silver dishes and spare cutlery.

'Where have they got to?' Luke glanced towards the open window, a slight frown on his face. 'Sit down, Miss Burbank; I'll have Disraeli go and look for them. They went off into the garden a few minutes ago.'

'Disraeli?' echoed Melanie, staring, and for the first time she saw the hint of a smile curve the sensuous mouth.

'One of the houseboys,' he elucidated. 'The Africans give their children the most famous of names. Another of my boys—one whose work is solely outside—is called Gladstone.'

She still stared, but this time she was noting the colour of his eyes again, deciding that it could change with his mood. Just now they were definitely brown, light brown, and expressionless.

A few minutes later, the 'two aunts', as Luke appeared to have named them, appeared from the stoep and without apologizing sat down at the glittering dinner table.

'Oh, but we've had such a natter!' exclaimed Aunt Cissy. 'How glad I am I came! Melanie dear, you don't look too happy. What is it? Come, dear, you must enjoy yourself, mustn't she, Luke?'

'I sincerely hope that she will enjoy her stay,' he replied with cool courtesy. 'I like to think that all my guests leave with only pleasant memories of their visit.'

How formal! Did the man never unbend? Melanie watched him from her place opposite; he was stiff and cold and unemotional, she had already decided. And yet there was that mouth; it seemed to brand him as a man who, put in the right atmosphere, could be as ardent as the rest.

'Your thoughts, Miss Burbank,' came his quiet voice across the table, 'are plainly most absorbing.' Half statement, half question; she strongly suspected that his words had been spoken merely for politeness, for the two aunts were so deep in conversation that it was impossible for Melanie to interrupt. That she had no desire for speech was of course not known to Luke, and so it was understandable that he should be a trifle concerned that she was having to sit quietly and listen without joining in.

'They were rather absorbing,' she returned, and did wonder what his reaction would have been had she revealed those thoughts to him. Instead, she changed the subject and, assuming an interest which she was far from feeling, she asked about his work.

'I grow timber and other products, but mainly I'm interested in citrus fruits.'

'Oranges and lemons.' She looked at him. 'I was on holiday in Cyprus once, and saw the lovely orange groves near Famagusta. They were a very attractive sight.'

'Ripening citrus fruits are indeed a most attractive sight,' he agreed, and then added, 'I also grow naartjes, which are tangerines.' His eyes wandered, first to his own aunt and then to hers. His lips pursed and she said without thinking,

'I don't suppose you're too happy at having three women in your house?'

His straight dark brows lifted a fraction.

'Now how am I to answer that, Miss Burbank?'

Melanie felt the colour rising in her cheeks.

'The question wasn't very tactful, I'm afraid.'

'Most untactful,' he retorted, unsparing of her feelings.

'Aunt Cissy was not too sure about your wanting to have us,' she said frankly. 'She gave me the impression that you didn't care for your bachelor existence to be disturbed.'

Luke's firm mouth twitched.

'Aunt Gertrude obviously gave her a picture of a staid, middle-aged bachelor, fixed in his ways, resentful of any deflection from routine or interference with his peculiar little eccentricities.' He paused, looking at her with a sort of quizzical interrogation. 'Might I venture to ask if the picture fits?'

Melanie looked at him with an expression of censure.

'What are you expecting me to say to that, Mr Shadwell?' she could not help saying, and to her surprise he laughed.

'Your counter action's approved,' he said, watching as she toyed with the crisp bread roll on her plate. 'So we're both intending to respect our roles of guest and host? Politeness shall prevail, whatever lies beneath in the way of our private opinion of each other?'

Melanie's back stiffened and her chin lifted.

'That,' she told him shortly, 'is far from tactful!'

The tawny eyes widened, subjecting her to an intense and arrogant stare. However, whatever he had intended to say was not to be voiced because at that moment Aunt Cissy, having caught the rather angry exclamation of her niece, turned her head and said,

'What are you two doing—having a quarrel already?'

'Quarrel?' repeated Melanie. 'No, of course not.'

'You were raising your voice, dear, and I just wondered.' said Aunt Cissy apologetically.

'Poor Melanie is perhaps suffering from "man-dis- like",' suggested Aunt Gertie, 'and who can blame her? Luke,' she continued in her rather forceful voice, and ignoring Melanie's discomfiture, 'you must make allowances for the child.'

His eyes flickered with interest as they moved from Melanie's flushed countenance to the rosy glowing face of his aunt.--^

'Must I? Now why is that?'

'I—it doesn't matter—I mean, it can be of no particular interest to Mr Shadwell,' put in Melanie, her colour mantle deepening now, but with anger.

'Mr Shadwell? Good gracious, child, he's Luke! You're cousins!'

'Several times removed,' supplemented Aunt Cissy, 'but cousins for all that.'

'I asked why I should be expected to make allowances for Melanie.' He saw the start given when he mentioned her name but, ignoring Melanie altogether, he gave his whole attention to his aunt. 'Is there some thing I ought to know?'

'Well, yes, I believe there is, just so that you will be kind and understanding to the child--'

'Aunt Gertie—*please!* Mr Shadwell doesn't want to know--'

'Oh, but you're mistaken,' came the cool determined interruption. 'I most certainly do want to know.'

Melanie looked daggers at him, her mouth tight. But there was nothing she could do, as his aunt was already giving him the sad story related to her by Aunt Cissy both in her letters and, Melanie suspected, again by word of mouth soon after the two had met. Come to think of it, there *had* been a short interlude of whispering in the back of the car as they were all being driven from the station to Luke's home.

'And so you see, Luke, you must try to make the child forget, since after all, that's the reason for her coming here.'

'I see--' His eyes rested on Melanie's face, which was now resuming its pallor as the colour faded from her cheeks. '*Two* disappointments in love. How very extraordinary,' he added thoughtfully as his flickering glance took in the clear-cut contours of her face, the large, widely-spaced blue eyes, the high wide forehead, creased a little now as if betraying pain. 'Yes ... most extraordinary.' He frowned, and then added, in a casual tone now, as if he were shrugging the matter off as of no real importance, 'Oh, well, it might well be third time lucky--'

'Third time!' Melanie threw him a deprecating glance and added vehemently, 'I'm not such a fool as to run my head into a noose ever again!'

CHAPTER TWO

THE night was moonless, but stars glistened from a deep purple sky; the lonely bushveld was silent, enfolded in peace with only the chirping of cicadas to give evidence of life out there in the beautiful grounds of the house.

Melanie stood on the rear stoep, her mind back- switching to that first evening, just a week ago, when she had been so embarrassed by the story which Aunt Gertie had told to Luke. He had been different since then, adopting towards her a sort of condescending kindness and sympathy which aroused in her nothing more than a burning resentment. She had no need of his sympathy; she had no wish for his kindness. Her experiences had been humiliating enough without this added feeling of debasement which his conduct was causing her. If only she had thought to make known her desire to her aunt—but it was a debatable point whether or not she in turn would have persuaded her cousin to keep silent. Aunt Cissy certainly would have acknowledged Melanie's wish, but Melanie suspected that, charming as she was, Aunt Gertie had a liking for the dramatic, whether it be related to circumstances or merely gossip.

She turned suddenly, her spine tingling; she knew that step and wished she had gone straight to her room instead of coming out here for a breath of fresh air, and for a break from the incessant chatter of the two aunts. *

'Hello, there. All alone in the dark? Why don't you switch on the light?' Luke reached above his head and the lamplight flared on the stoep. 'Mind if I join you? Your aunt and mine haven't stopped talking for a week. It gets a little wearing, as I suppose you too have noticed.' Cool and casual tones, yet distinctly edged with that inflection of sympathy. She froze, but managed to answer in a calm and even voice,

'Of course, Mr--'

'Can't we have Luke for a change?' he cut in with some asperity. 'The aunts think you're crazy!'

'Very well,' she conceded, 'I'll try.'

'Don't strain yourself,' with swift sarcasm. 'Addressing me as Mr Shadwell won't help in your defences, you know.' He came and stood beside her; Melanie wanted to move away, but for the sake of manners she resignedly stayed where she was. He seemed too tall altogether, when he came as close as this, and she disliked intensely the hint of shaving lotion or some such which reminded her of heather moorlands and mossy mountain streams.... Yes, she *hated* it! —or did she ...?

'My defences?' she repeated as the meaning of his words drifted slowly into her consciousness. 'What do you imply by that?'

'You're so transparent,' he answered, hitching up a trouser leg and resting his foot on the lower rail of the stoep. 'Your fear's so great that you're all tight and hard inside.'

'Fear?' she echoed with a frown. 'Fear of what?'

'Don't put on that air of perplexity,' he almost snapped. 'You can't deceive me so easily. You know darned well what I mean.' She had the grace to blush and his smile was one of satisfaction as he noticed this heightened colour. 'You seem to regard all men as potential breakers of hearts.'

'Nonsense!' she contradicted, 'I do not! In any case, what men have I met, other than you?' 'You were at the Club in Rayneburg twice during this past week,' he reminded her. 'I watched you with young Van de Westeyn; he wanted to be friendly, but you treated him as though he

had the plague. And then there was young Groenewald. He was genuinely trying to make you welcome, and what did you do?'

'I c-can't remember.'

'Liar!'

'Well ... surely I can please myself! I've no wish to dance or even to talk to them!'

'Then why go?'

'Because you said you didn't want me to be left here—it wasn't right that you, as my host, should take the aunts and not me.'

He gave a small intake of breath, denoting his impatience with her.

'You're the strangest woman I've ever come across,' he told her. 'Are you intending to be like this all your life?'

'I am,' briefly and very forcibly.

'Why,' he suggested with a satirical smile, 'don't you consider taking the veil?'

Melanie coloured.

'Such sarcasm's in very bad taste,' she said. 'You seem to have forgotten what you said about each of us respecting the other.'

'Guest and host ... yes, I'm glad you reminded me. All the same, we haven't been exactly polite at times, have we? You are of course to blame, for the most part. You're so touchy, so liable to shrink and then to expand--'

'Must you talk in riddles?'

'You flare up for nothing,' he told her, bypassing the interruption. 'But first you curl up inside yourself, trying to find protection, rather like the little creatures that encyst.' 'Thanks!'

'Don't mention it.'

Melanie said, a curious light in her eye,

'I don't understand you at all.'

The tawny eyes portrayed amusement.

'Do you want to?' he asked, and she gave an impatient shrug of her shoulders. Civility was so very difficult to summon on occasions like this.

'Not particularly,' was her blunt reply. 'Nevertheless, it might be more comfortable for both of us if we kept to the prosaic, and the uncomplicated.'

'Prosaic? Just the sort of word I'd expect you to use.'

'You wouldn't expect me to use the word romantic, would you?'

'Never—at least, not in this mood you're in at present. Tell me, how long did it take you to get over the first break?'

'Giles?' The word came out unbidden, and Luke's eyes flickered with interest. 'Three and a half years— about.'

'Dear me! What fragile hearts women do have. Did yours really take over three years to mend?'

The colour in her cheeks deepened.

'I'd rather not talk about it.' She stared up at him in wordless misery for a long moment before adding, 'It isn't easy to talk about it at any time, but now--' She paused and Luke prompted quietly,

'But now—what?'

She shook her head and frowned.

'It's harder still to talk to someone who can't even begin to understand.'

'What makes you so sure that I won't understand?' he asked, and she thought she detected an edge of irritation to his voice.

'You're--' She stopped, biting back the words that rose to her lips. To her amazement he finished for her.

'—hard and unfeeling, insensible to the troubles of others.' Crisp the tone and short. Melanie nodded despite his glinting expression.

'That's right. I would also have added the word emotionless.'

A silence ensued, a strange uneasy silence as far as Melanie was concerned. She was experiencing something that savoured of a warning, vague, indefinable— yet troublesome. It was as if Luke were smouldering beneath this cool and placid exterior,

'Emotionless, eh?' And now the voice, though still quiet, contained a strange vibrancy that caused a tingle to run the total length of Melanie's spine. 'That, my dear Melanie, is a very dangerous thing to say to a man who has any self-respect at all.' 'Oh ... is it? Why?' This was spoken slowly, for she was attempting to analyse his words. 'I--'

'Yes, it is. Because, you see, he will in all probability have the urge to disprove your statement.' She stepped back swiftly as the warning took shape in the form of a flash of perception, but she could not

escape the hand that shot out and jerked her in no gentle fashion until she found herself hard up against his sinewed body. Her face was brought up with even less gentleness as, catching her hair, he pulled it back, and the little cry of pain she uttered was stifled as his hard demanding mouth came down on hers. She struggled wildly but in vain, twisting this way and that, determined to break free. But his hold was like a hawser, his mouth sensuous, his body deliberately pressed close to hers. Released at last, Melanie leant back against the rail of the stoep, fighting for breath, her eyes flashing fire. In Luke's eyes was a sort of amused triumph; he was still close but not touching her.

'You utter cad!' she cried, tears of mortification streaming down her face. 'How dare you, a stranger, act like that!'

'Stranger?' with a lift of his brows. 'I was under the impression that we are cousins—er—several times removed, as your aunt remarked.'

'I hate you! I only wish I could leave your house at once!'

'Too late, my dear, far too late. We'll talk about it in the morning—if you're still of the same mind, that is.' His mocking eyes looked her over before settling on her tear-stained face. 'You might on reflection decide you liked my kisses, and wish to stay--'

'You self-conceited, pompous overbearing creature! It's no wonder you're a bachelor—for I'm sure no woman in her right mind would even give you a second glance!' She spoke wildly, saying anything that entered her mind regardless of whether or not it made sense. For all she desired was to lash out at him with her tongue, to let him hear things about himself that would ring in his ears for a very long time to come. Her mouth was bruised, her bones aching. Her hatred for him and his sex consumed her and she went on, finding adjectives that, had they all applied, would have surely branded him as the son of

Satan himself. 'I shall tell my aunt about this!' she blazed at last. 'And she will in turn tell it to your aunt!'

'I don't think you will, my dear--'

'And don't call me your dear!'

'My, but what a temper you have! Be careful, cousin of mine, for I might just turn you upside down, throw you across my knee and give you the beating of your life.' As he spoke he was breaking off a branch from the bougainvillaea vine which wound luxuriously around a white stone pillar supporting the stoep. With deliberate flicks of his fingers he was stripping the branch of its flowers and leaves while Melanie watched, fascinated, unable to escape because he was standing in front of her and she knew, somehow, that if she ventured to move he would prevent her from doing so.

'You—you w-wouldn't d-dare,' she stammered when at last, the branch fully stripped, he held it out for her to see.

'Dare what?' he inquired challengingly. 'Dare what, my dear?'

She blinked, not at all sure if he was teasing her or determinedly serious.

'You wouldn't dare to—to t-touch me--' Her voice trailed away and she paled as she noted his slanting glance.

'You do ask for it, don't you? Are you daring me, Melanie?' he added in an almost gentle tone. 'Well, are you?'

She swallowed and shook her head.

'N-no,' she stammered meekly.

'Sensible girl.' The stick was tossed away, right over her head. 'Incidentally, I wouldn't have used the stick —my hand would have been more than adequate.' Again the glint in those tawny eyes. He took a step towards her, but she made no attempt to step back this time. Her hand was taken again and she made no protest when he bent his head and kissed her quivering lips. 'Why so docile?' he wanted to know, but answered before she had time to do so, 'You're learning, little one, learning that what I want I shall have— even if I take it by force. Much more comfortable, wasn't it, to abandon the struggle?'

She flashed him a glance of hatred.

'I shall leave here first thing in the morning, whether my aunt agrees to come with me or not!'

But of course she did not leave, did not even think of leaving. She had—apart from that mortifying incident—been enjoying the holiday, inasmuch as she could enjoy it with her mind so often going back to Robin and his treatment of her. The country drew her and she had walked a great deal since coming here. The silence and the peace were especially attractive and she was not in the least troubled by the fact that she was more or less on her own, the two aunts having become such bosom friends that they were always together. Sometimes Aunt Cissy would suggest that Melanie come into town with them when they went shopping, but invariably she refused, preferring to wander along the dry stream bed and find flowers she had never known before, or sit quietly and watch the brightly-plumaged birds flitting about among the gum or cypress trees, their lovely wings flashing in the sunshine. Luke, aware that she could ride, had told her she could have Sanaan, a gentle mare which he kept specially for any lady guest who might desire to take a canter along the dusty road that flanked the river bed.

'I'd like to take advantage of your offer if I may,' she told him stiffly three days after the incident on the stoep. 'Will one of the boys saddle her for me?'

Luke had come from the fields where he had been with the boys pruning the lemon trees.

'I'll get her ready for you,' he offered, his eyes faintly mocking as they looked into hers. 'Coming round—at last?'

Melanie counted ten before she spoke.

'You couldn't expect me to forget *that* in a hurry, could you?'

'Shouldn't bear malice,' he returned carelessly. 'Come on, then, and we'll see to Sanaan.'

He saddled the mare for her and then gave her a hand up, even though she did not require his aid. 'Where are you going?' he asked.

'Just along the road and back.'

He hesitated.

'If you wait a minute I'll come with you.'

'It's not necessary for me to be on a leading-rein,' was her sarcastic rejoinder. 'I wouldn't like to keep you from your work.'

His eyes glinted dangerously.

'You're forgetting that pact we made—about respect and all that.'

'I'm sorry. I do keep forgetting that I'm a guest in your house and therefore I must treat you with some semblance of respect.'

'Some semblance?' he echoed. 'If it's such a strain then don't bother. It lets me out, so we'll cut even.'

She bit her lip.

'I'm sorry,' she said again and, flicking the reins, cantered away, leaving him standing there staring after her, a deep frown on his face.

She galloped along the river bed, under the shade of the gums and later, the willows. Reaching a pool that had not dried up, she reined in and dismounted. Sanaan was tethered to a tree close to a lush patch of grass which she instantly began to crop. Melanie, in slacks and a white short-sleeved shirt, sat on a boulder and gazed into the pool. She could see life, but it wasn't in the form of fish. However, she found interest in the way the little wriggly creatures got about so swiftly in the water. Black butterflies flitted about among the crimson flowers and birds came close to her feet in their search for insects. A deep hush blanketed the landscape, like the silence of eternity, she thought, and realized that dusk was very close. She rose and rode on instead of turning back; she wanted to find the swallow hole down which the river plunged.

She had been riding for no more than ten minutes when she heard the cadenza of a waterfall, breaking in on the vast silence. And there it was, dramatic, awe-inspiring, as the water, coming from a higher level, plunging over a hard bank of rocks, cascaded down and disappeared into the swallow hole, leaving the rest of the bed dry, downstream from the swallow hole. Melanie stood in the gathering shadows watching the last rays of the dying sun as they painted the mountains with rose and gold and palest yellow. Tall palm trees swayed, their dark fronds, speckled with crimson stolen from the sun, silhouetted against the darkening sky. The veld became insignificant as the shadows deepened, colours changing from the green of tropical grass lands to drab fawns and browns and a dull sort of emerald. Over

the vast landscape night was falling and stars were already peeping through the purple velvet sky.

Turning, Melanie began to gallop back, but she suddenly knew fear, as, with the moon obscured by cloud, the world around her was growing darker and darker with every moment that passed. Sanaan stumbled and whinnied and almost stopped; Melanie coaxed her on, but it was clear that the mare did not like the darkness—not when she was in territory that was unfamiliar to her.

How stupid, Melanie chided herself. She was unable to see at all now and she felt sure that the path had run out. Or, more correctly, she had lost it, taking a fork instead of keeping to the main route. She reined in and slid down from the horse's back, patting her reassuringly and murmuring to her in soft and gentle tones. The mare nuzzled against her shoulder and whinnied again. Moving cautiously, but still holding on to the reins, Melanie thought she had found the path and, re-mounting, she cantered along, sure that she had the right path now. But time went on and no sign of lights appeared to tell her that she was nearing the house. Fear caught her and she stopped again, allsorts of visions running through her mind, visions of wild animals and snakes, of Africans on the prowl. Her heart naturally began to beat over-rate and her nerves played her up repeatedly; she saw many strange shapes which, afterwards, she was fairly sure did not exist at all.

What time was it? She had no idea, but felt sure that it must be almost dinner time and there would be near panic when the two aunts were informed that she was missing.

She was just about to re-mount when she heard a call, and too unutterably relieved to speak, heard it again and again before she was able to make her voice loud enough to be heard. The voice came nearer, and nearer, until at last she was able to recognize it as that of Luke. How mad he would be! But she was not concerned with his

reaction to her foolishness in not returning in time; she was far too relieved at the idea of his finding her at all, for she had in her wild imaginings found herself spending the night out here, in the wilderness of the primitive bushveld.

'What the hell--!' Luke spoke savagely as he came up to her, a powerful torch in his hand. It shone directly into her face and instinctively she put up a hand to shield her eyes. 'Are you quite out of your mind? What in the name of Hades made you stay out here all this time? And why didn't you keep to the path, as you told me you were doing?'

'I somehow lost it,' began Melanie. 'I'm terribly sorry---'

'Sorry! Do you realize that you've got your aunt and mine worried sick?' In his fury he lifted a hand and she stepped to one side, half expecting a slap on the arm. 'Come on, give me the reins, and you get up on her back!'

'But--'

'Up, I said, and no arguments!'

She obeyed at once, and nothing more was said between them until they arrived at the homestead where every light had been turned on. The two aunts and four servants were there, on the wide white steps, and there were cries of relief from Aunt Cissy which were echoed by her cousin in an even louder voice.

'My love! Oh, but we thought you were never coming back!'

'I wondered if we'd ever see you again!'

'You found her, baas. I knew you would.'

'Missus, I'm glad to see you back.' It was Elizabeth, and she came forward to smile at Melanie.

What a fuss! Melanie had never felt so guilty in her life. She could see her watch now and was horrified to discover that it was almost nine o'clock.

'Is Luke putting Sanaan away?' from Aunt Cissy. 'Oh, but he was worried. What happened, child? Did you miss your way?'

Melanie nodded, unsure of whether she was glad or not to have the opportunity of getting in a word of her own.

'I feel so guilty, and foolish. I hadn't meant to stay out until dark, but it came down so suddenly.'

'You know by now that it comes down suddenly,' snapped the voice from behind her, and she turned to look up into the angry face of Luke. How forbidding he appeared! His face was tight, his jawline taut, his eyes glinting with anger. Regardless of her aunt's presence he set into Melanie, and before she quite knew it she was in tears.

'Luke,' intervened Aunt Gertie severely, 'that's enough. Melanie's gone through sufficient, out there on her own, without your laying into her like this. She's exhausted and I expect she was very frightened, so leave her alone. Go upstairs, dear, and freshen up. We haven't had dinner yet--'

'You haven't?' she interrupted without thinking. 'Naturally we haven't!' from Luke wrathfully. 'You've had everyone running around looking for you! Dare to do anything like that again and you'll answer to me! All right,' he added with increasing anger, 'you can dry those eyes 1 Tears have no effect on me whatsoever, not in these sort of circumstances. Upstairs—and don't keep us waiting long!'

'Luke,' protested Aunt Cissy, 'do have a little pity for the child. Melanie dear--'

'Yes, Auntie,' she returned wearily, 'I'm going to tidy up. I'll be down in less than ten minutes.'

Dinner was a quiet meal, with even the aunts being rather subdued by the frowning countenance of the master of the house.

And when it was over Melanie went straight to bed, weary and unhappy and blaming Robin for it all. She could not sleep and after trying for over an hour she got up, slipped into a negligé and stepped out on to the verandah which ran outside her window. How cool the night, and how silent. Twinkling lights in the very far distance signified the existence of an African village and across the lonely bushveld there drifted the weird and primitive notes of a native drum-beat. It fell, muffled, on the sweet-scented night air, mingling with the unmusical whirring of the cicadas in the tall cedars at the far end of the garden. A sound altogether different caught Melanie's ear and as it drew nearer she realized it was a vehicle of some kind. Then light flared and a ranch wagon crunched to a halt in the floodlit drive close to the front of the house. Two young people got out, a man and a woman. Melanie heard them being introduced to her aunt as Jancis and Edward Beaufort, brother and sister. The girl was dressed in slacks and a dark shirt, her brother in slacks and a sweater. Luke appeared; there was some chatter and laughter, with the voices of the two aunts rising now and then above the others. Then they were all on the stoep, sitting with drinks and enjoying a chat in the cool of the late evening. Melanie heard her name mentioned by Aunt Gertie, who said that she had been lost and so had gone early to bed.

'Oh, how dreadful!' It was the girl who spoke and she sounded genuinely upset. 'It must have been terrifying for her. I hope, Luke, that you didn't scold her.'

'What makes you think I'd do a thing like that?' he asked, and Melanie gave a little gasp at the bland way in which this was said.

'I know you, Luke—your infernal temper, that is. Did you scold your cousin?'

'Dreadfully, dear Jancis. That's why the child's gone to bed. She couldn't stand his scowling countenance any longer.'

Voices now were lowered a little and Melanie lost most of the conversation. But just as she was going in again she heard Edward say,

'We hear you're going back to England, Mrs Noden. Is that right?'

'Yes, Edward. I'm getting on a bit and I feel I should be retiring. It's not that I work hard here at all, but I do do a little for Luke. If I go he can then get someone else.'

'You've done more than a bit,' contradicted Luke. 'You did everything for Father before he died and I'm exceedingly grateful to you. Also, you know how I feel about your leaving; you can retire here, for Elizabeth and the houseboys can do all that's necessary.'

'It's kind of you, dear Luke, but I do want to be with my people—and live in a civilized country for a while.'

'It's understandable,' put in Jancis. 'If you've lived here all your life as we have, and Luke of course, you don't want to live anywhere else. The heat and, drought and the loneliness don't affect you at all, simply because you're used to it.'

'Well, I'm used to it by now, but all the same, I want to go home.'

'She's coming back with my niece and me,' Melanie heard her aunt say.

'When will that be?'

'In about a fortnight's time, or just over.'

'So soon? But you've only just come. A month isn't anywhere near long enough! Why don't you stay for Christmas—it's only three months away.'

'Well ... I could, but my niece might not wish to. However, it would be nice to have Christmas in the height of summer. I'll put it to her in the morning.'

Melanie turned into her room, her eyes glinting and her mouth tight. Her aunt could stay if she wished, but she herself had no desire to spend another two months under the roof of the vile-tempered, overbearing Luke Shadwell.

CHAPTER THREE

SHE was up as the dawn broke, having slept badly, her uncontrolled thoughts flitting all the while between Luke Shadwell and Robin. She squirmed at the memory of Luke's ruthless scolding; she shrank from the memory of the scene in which Robin had—without any prior warning hint—told her that he had fallen in love with her sister. Life seemed to hold nothing for her at all and she wondered if she would ever have an anchor, and what form it was likely to take. True, she could make her home with her aunt, but that could not be for always.

After taking a bath and getting into slacks and a shirt, she went down into the garden. It had rained violently during the night and now the earth smelled fresh, and the dust had been laid. The air was heady and cool, for the sun was still very low, having come over the horizon in a glorious blaze of fiery crimson which flared in a great arc across the brittle sky. Melanie strolled through the lovely grounds, glancing back now and then to appreciate the homestead from different angles; white, Dutch-gabled, it was indeed a stately home with its impressive pillars and wide shining steps, its portico and elegant balustrade and lofty stoeps. Ancient, magnificent trees surrounded the grounds which themselves were a paradise of subtropical trees and shrubs. She loitered by a bed of canna lilies and was just bending to touch one when she realized she was no longer alone. She stiffened and turned. Luke was there, the picture of health and vitality, his bronzed face turned towards the sunrise, his eyes narrowed against its fiery glare. He was in shorts and a dazzling white shirt, and one hand was tucked casually into his belt.

Her colour rose, which was natural, since leaping out from her subconscious was the incident of last evening.--

'You're up early,' was his casual comment as he examined her face in a critical way.

'I woke very early, and this seemed an excellent opportunity for a contemplation of nature--' She tailed off, surprised that he should be showing amusement. He was, though, for his mouth was twitching and his eyes glimmering slightly.

'Prettily put,' he remarked. 'I could add to it if you wished.'

'I don't understand?'

'Melanie,' he said, trading his humour for impatience with the rapid change of mood which only a man of his personality could effect, 'what makes you assume that obtuseness which is so profitless simply because it doesn't deceive me in the least?'

'All right, I do understand, then,' she almost snapped. She was angry at having her solitude broken into, especially by Luke, who was the last person she would wish to spend her time with. 'And what would you add, might I ask?'

'I would add more in the way of atmosphere. You came out in order to appreciate the bountiful gifts which nature can provide; you wanted to watch the sunrise alone, to smell the delightful scents of flowers drenched in rain, to wander in the fullness of the peace around you, to drink in the exotic beauty of the scenery--'

'You should be a poet,' she broke in sarcastically.

'I hadn't finished,' shortly and with another critical examination of her face. 'There's nothing poetical in what I have to add.' He paused, offering her time to comment, but she gave a small and impatient shake of her head. Why didn't he go, seeing that he was fully aware of her desire to be alone? 'You wanted to do all those things, and yet you intended wallowing in your misery, half of your mind given over—willingly—to the misfortunes you've suffered.' Again he paused and now his eyes were hard and censorious. 'Do you believe you're the only one who's suffered?'

'No, of course not! But to be—be jilted twice! What about my pride?' Anger surging even higher, she glared up at him, her small fists clenched at her sides. 'You talk as if I'm making a martyr of myself! But then you have no understanding, no heart!'

'I wouldn't agree, Melanie.' And suddenly his tone was gentle and although she had in her anger turned from him she knew instinctively that his eyes had softened too. 'But I would admit to a measure of impatience. You came here to help in the forgetting, didn't you?'

'It was mainly that, yes.'

'But you have no intention of forgetting. On the contrary, you allow your mind to dwell on what has happened to you. Correct me if I'm wrong,' and because she still avoided his eyes he took her by the shoulders and turned her round to face him. Her head was bowed; he tilted it up and instinctively she caught at his hand which was under her chin. She let go as if it were hot, realizing what she had done. Her colour fluctuated delicately and she saw his gaze assume a most odd expression. Her eyes were clouded with pain and her lovely mouth moved spasmodically. 'I tried to be kind,' he was saying after a long moment of profound silence, 'not only because Aunt Gertrude asked me to but because I wanted to. But you refused to respond--"Because I don't want your pity!" she flashed, stepping back so that some little distance was put between them. 'I don't want anyone's pity--Would you, in similar circumstances?'

Without hesitation he shook his head, but immediately went on to say that he had always assumed that women were different from men in that respect.

'I assumed that, being the gentler, more emotional sex, they instinctively wished for sympathy when troubles beset them. I suppose,' he added, reflectively rubbing his chin, 'that it's all part of the male instinct to protect.'

Melanie stared then, her eyes wide and disbelieving. Here was a different slant altogether on his character! Never would she have given him credit for traits such as he was revealing in this conversation. His expression too was faintly troubled and the softness which she knew would be in his eyes was most certainly there as, looking down at her, they seemed to smile even though they were grave as well.

She was moved to say, her own voice softer now, having lost all trace of anger,

'I'm sorry, Luke. I didn't understand--'

'But you do now?'

She nodded.

'I think so.'

'And you admit that I was right when I said you're dwelling on your misfortunes?'

Again she nodded, moistening her lips.

'I Suppose you're right,' she answered, but grudgingly for all that. And she did decide to add, 'I can't just put it from me like turning off a tap. I was in love with Robin.'

'But he wasn't for you, Melanie,' he pointed out.

'Had you and he been meant for one another then nothing short of death itself would have separated you.'

Again the seriousness of his words and the manner of their delivery surprised her. The cold hard logic of them did not; it was exactly what she would have expected of him.

'Nevertheless,' she returned obstinately, 'I can't just accept this and, all in a moment, forget that I ever cared for Robin.'

Luke said quietly, 'Would you have him back, were he to come to you at this very moment?'

She gave a start, blinking her lashes as she endeavoured to provide a truthful answer to this.

'I don't know--'

'Oh, yes, you do! You would *not* have him back.'

'But if he explained that he'd made a mistake ...?'

'For you, Melanie, there is a standard set in your mind. This fellow Robin falls short—excessively short—of your high standards. Forget him; he was never worth a thought of yours.'

Melanie said nothing, but she reflected on what he had been saying. She knew that she ought not to take Robin back; should he come to her, but she was not sure whether she would be able to build up a sufficiently effective defence against his persuasive powers, for these had always been strong, as was proved by the way he had led her from the path she had chosen after her first disappointment in love—when she had lost Giles to her sister.

'I think I'll carry on with my little stroll,' she said quiveringly at last. 'Talking about Robin doesn't do me any good at all.'

'On the contrary, I believe this talk has done a great deal of good. Do you mind if I stroll along with you?' he added after a pause. Melanie had taken a few steps already, but she stopped, staring with a sudden frown at the lovely canna lilies in the border beside her. Behind them a scarlet hibiscus shone in the early crimson, light and a small protective hedge of oleanders sent forth their sweet elusive perfume

on to the fresh morning air. She wanted to be alone! It was an urgent desire coming from the heart. And yet for some incomprehensible reason she found herself saying,

'No, of course I don't mind.'

'Good.' He was brisk all at once. 'I wanted to talk to you about a problem that's come up.' He fell into step, adjusting his speed to hers. 'I've a very good friend who has recently lost his wife. He has a little girl of six and a half who happens to be fond of me—for some quite inexplicable reason,' he added with a sort of grim humour. And then he paused and Melanie glanced sideways at him, wondering where all this was leading. 'He—Kevin—has to go to England in about a fortnight's time to see to all the legal aspects of a big transfer of land and other assets into the hands of his brother, whose trustee he has been since the boy was small. This brother is now twenty, at which age he comes into a huge fortune; this was left by an aunt who also left a fortune to Kevin, who was old enough at the time of her death both to come into his own inheritance and to be trusted to look after that of his young brother.'

Again Luke paused and Melanie waited, bewildered by these confidences and now certain that they were leading up to something of importance ... importance to her personally. 'Kevin has excellent servants, but they're all Africans and he can't leave Deborah with them—it wouldn't be fair in any case. He can't take her with him because his whole time will be taken up with this business he has to do. So,' added Luke slowly, 'he has asked me to have her, believing that Aunt Gertrude would be here. Well, as you know, she's returning with your aunt in two weeks' time, so there won't be any white woman here either. I practically gave him my promise when he asked me a few weeks ago and I don't feel like going back on it. Melanie, would you care to stay and care for Deborah?' She looked up swiftly, shaking her head. 'No, I couldn't. You see, I have my flat—' 'Your aunt said that you had to give up your job in order to come here.'

'That's right; there are no problems about a job, but my flat. It's coming winter in England and there's no heat on. Everything will get damp.' She frowned in thought. 'This little girl—as she's obviously been used to having only her father—and the native servants, of course—her position wouldn't be any different here, would it?'

'Her mother's been dead only just over six weeks, and in consequence her father's given her the whole of his time. I would not be able to do this, since I have my work to do. I did in fact sound out Aunt Gertrude and she was not at all taken with the idea of having a child on her hands for two whole months--'

'Two months? That's a long time for her father to be away.'

'There's a vast amount of work to be done, apparently, for this aunt left over a million pounds to this young nephew. Yes, Kevin will be away for about a couple of months, if not a little longer.'

Melanie stopped by a high trellis on which was draped a lovely bougainvillea vine, its lilac flowers making a magnificent display against a background of cypress trees. She said thoughtfully,

'Aunt Cissy might like to stay--'

'She would like to stay; she told me last evening after my visitors had gone—I had a couple of young friends of mine drop in after you had gone to bed,' he explained, and Melanie nodded before admitting that she not only knew this but had been on the verandah when they were all talking. 'You probably heard her saying it, then?'

'Yes, but I decided there and then that no matter what Aunt Cissy decided I was going home at the end of a month.'

His lips twitched.

'I can't say that I blame you, Melanie. I had no right to lay into you like that, especially before the aunts. I apologize, but must add that if you do anything like that again I'm quite likely to be even more angry than I was last evening.'

Not a very gracious way to apologize, she thought, but made an apology of her own for all that.

'I ought to have considered the inconvenience to others,' she owned guiltily. 'There won't be another time, Luke.'

'Good girl!' He flicked a hand, asking if she wished to carry on walking. 'We've no need to confine ourselves to the garden,' he added, 'we can go beyond; it's still too early for breakfast.'

'Very well, we'll walk a little farther.'

Once through the gates they were on a stony ochre- coloured lane just wide enough for a car or ranch wagon. It ran through Luke's lands and as mixed farming prevailed in this particular region there stretched away—on both sides of the lane—the emerald green mealie fields, tall healthy plants with their 'slender leaves rustling in the breeze. Away to the west were great expanses of citrus trees and in the opposite direction lay the vast region which was given over to forestry. Melanie could understand why Luke 'was unable to give Deborah the attention which she obviously needed at this sad time in her young life. He talked now, and she learned that although her aunt had expressed a desire to remain long enough to see a South African Christmas, Aunt Gertie desired nothing more than to be in England for that festivity. And so it had already been decided that the original arrangements still stood.

'So you see,' continued Luke, with a certain degree of persuasion but with no sign of anything that could even remotely be described as begging, 'I'm enlisting your aid. I did mention to your aunt, after mine

had gone to bed, that I was intending to put this proposition to you. She was of the opinion that it would do you good to stay.'

'In order to forget,' with bitterness as once again the face of Robin came into her mental vision.

'Deborah needs someone, Melanie.' Gentle the tone but not persuasive this time. He was making a statement which she could muse over or ignore, whichever she chose.

She slanted him a glance and he turned his head, the tawny eyes examining, as they so often were. She knew she was pale, that in the harsh morning light the dark rings beneath her eyes would not be exactly enhancing to a face that was in her opinion only 'passable'. What she did not know was that her sadness had about it a sort of appeal, that the distress portrayed by the quivering of her lips lent a certain beauty to them to which Luke was by no means blind.

'The flat,' began Melanie. 'I don't want to leave it all that time.'

'I see,' crisply and with a sort of grim resignation. 'Forget it, Melanie—forget I ever asked you to stay.'

That evening there was a dance at the Jasmine Club and although Aunt Cissy maintained she was far too old to dance she nevertheless wanted to go, and obligingly Luke offered to take her and Aunt Gertrude.

Melanie refused, saying she preferred to stay in and read.

'But, dearest,' protested her aunt, 'you'll be lonely all by yourself.'

'I don't want to dance,' she returned in firm implacable tones, and Lj^ke, turning from his contemplation of two piccanins who had

come from the native hut where they lived and were in the field with their father, said coldly,

'Melanie must do as she pleases. She's my guest and as such her wishes must be observed by everyone.'

Aunt Cissy looked askance at her, her lips forming a big surprised 'Ooh' while her cousin, more familiar with her nephew's moods, observed rather dryly,

'You two've been at it again, eh? I asked you to be kind to the child.'

The child--Melanie drew in her breath. In normal circumstances she might not have minded this expression, but of late she had begun to resent it, and at this moment she was actually riled by it. However, she let it pass, naturally, and she also let pass Luke's remarks, but on finding herself alone that evening she began to wonder if she really wanted it that way. It was so quiet, for the houseboys had long since gone off to the hut they occupied among the little cluster of native huts a quarter of a mile or so along the lane. Elizabeth was in, though, for she was a widow and had a bedroom in the house.

Melanie picked up her book and tried not to allow her nerves to trouble her. She had turned several pages when it dawned on her that she had not taken in one word of the text. She laid it aside and leant back in the big armchair, wondering what Elizabeth was doing, there at the far end of the rambling old house. The curtains were closed, but suddenly she wanted them open, so that she could see outside. But apart from the flickering lights from the native village there was nothing to see—except for the stars, and the indistinct outlines of trees and kopjes and the grotesque shape of the distant massif. Cicades trilled into the cool night air, but except for this the silence was intense. Never had she experienced such total isolation, such frightening aloneness as she was feeling now. Her heart began to

thump and it took all her restraint to stand still and not to turn and run to find Elizabeth.

Impatiently she closed the curtains, feeling sheepish at her fear, but try as she would she could not settle, and at last she decided that there was nothing wrong in going along to find Elizabeth. Alternatively she could ring the bell and ask for a drink of tea or something, but she just had to move, so she went along the corridor to the kitchen. It was in total darkness and in a sort of frenzy she snapped on the light.

'Elizabeth,' she called, going towards the door of the room occupied by the woman. 'Elizabeth—you're not asleep, are you?' Her voice sounded cracked and hoarse even to her own ears and she made a tremendous effort to steady her nerves. 'Elizabeth!' Still no answer and her heart seemed to be rising, slowly but relentlessly,

into her throat. 'Elizabeth--' Melanie turned the handle and pushed the door inwards, feeling with trembling fingers for the light switch. There—she had found it!

The room was empty and in a flash Melanie recalled Luke's passing remark that the woman was keeping company with an African from the village. But she had gone out without permission, of that Melanie was convinced, for Luke would never leave his guest alone in the house.

Back in the large well-lighted sitting-room she felt a little better, but not for long; the idea of being so far from a white person and so near the native village terrified her, even though Luke had told her that the Africans were to be trusted. Supposing one or other of them should decide to come prowling round, believing the baas had taken all his guests into Rayneburg and that the house was empty. This and other unlikely thoughts flitting through her mind, Melanie was soon in that state where she was ready to imagine anything. She listened until the ringing silence of the bushveld out there brought an ache to her ears.

She moved about the room, glancing at the clock. It would be at least another three hours before the others would be back. Three hours-- She flung aside the curtains again, and then, driven by some force she could not control, she opened the window and stepped out on to the flower-strewn stoep. Light flared from the room behind, flooding the space in front of the house. Melanie stood very still, staring out into the awesome blackness, trying to pick out shapes again. Yes, there they were; once her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness she could discern them. The grove of eucalyptus trees too, to the left of her and fringing the eastern side of the garden. Luke had told her that these immigrants from Australia were to be found in many parts of South Africa now, and on the veld these flowering gums were certainly a familiar feature of the landscape.

Suddenly she froze, the hairs on her arms and at the back of her neck standing straight up. Her heart shot right into her throat again and her legs went like jelly. No, she told herself, it was not a low insidious growl that she had heard. But there it was again—much closer and not a growl at all, but the bloodcurdling echo of a jackal's mournful cry. Swallowing in an endeavour to dislodge the blockage in her throat, Melanie stepped back into the room and closed the window. But as she made to draw the curtains she saw the two flaring headlights of a car and seconds later the long sleek vehicle ground to a standstill close to the front door.

'Luke!' she cried and, without any warning at all, sank gently to the floor as blackness swept away all conscious thought from her mind.

She was lying on the couch when she came round; the light was dimmed, only one standard lamp being left on, and that had had a cloth of some kind flung over it.

'Wh-what happened?' she asked weakly, but even before he had time to say anything she had added, shuddering as she did so, 'I was terrified, Luke. I was quite alone--'

'I know,' he returned grimly. 'I completely forgot that Thursday's Elizabeth's night off. That's why I'm here; I remembered while I was at the Club.' He had a glass in his hand which, presumably, he had had ready beforehand. 'Drink this and talk afterwards.' Gently he eased her up on the cushions.

'You came away—because you remembered?' She stared into his eyes and decided that they weren't tawny at all, but a soft and warm shade of brown. 'That was kind of you—very kind.'

'Drink your brandy,' he ordered roughly. 'It wasn't kind at all. You know full well that you resent kindness. I returned because it was my duty to do so. Drink it, I say!'

'If it's brandy it'll make me sick--'

'At once!' he cut in, but she shook her head.

'I'm all right now, Luke,' she assured him, and held out the glass for him to take from her.

His eyes glinting and, she decided, not of a warm brown colour after all, he told her in no uncertain terms that if she did not drink the brandy right away he would pour it down her throat. He looked as if he would, too, and so she obeyed, shuddering and pulling a face and saying that it burned her mouth and throat.

'And now,' he said when she had drained the glass, 'you can tell me what it was that caused you to faint?'

'You.'

'Me?'

'I was terrified, and when I saw your car I was so relieved that I—I—well, I just lost consciousness.'

He shook his head as if this made no sense to him at all.

'What were you afraid of—apart from being alone in the house, that was?'

'All sorts of things--' She stopped, ashamed of her fears and in consequence loath to talk about them. But she might have known that Luke would force it all from her by the simple expedient of prompting her each time she made a break in her story.

'So you tied yourself up into tight little knots of fear for no reason at all?'

'I feel so very foolish about it all—now that you're here.' This last phrase was spoken without thought and he smiled a grim smile and said, , 'So for once you're glad to see me, eh?'

Melanie looked at him, her mind not totally clear yet. She thought he was far too big and overpowering, standing there, looking down into her pallid face, examining her as if he desired to know exactly what was going on in her mind.

'I was never more glad to see anyone in my life,' came her honest reply at length. And then, more in order to stall any sarcastic comment that might be forthcoming as a result of her words, she asked him to sit down.

'Sit down?' with a puzzled look. 'Why?'

'I don't like you standing--' Her voice trailed away and she put a hand to her head. 'I think I'm going to pass out again,' she said, but Luke had hold of her, his hands beneath her armpits.

'No, you're not! Just hold on—tell yourself that you're not going to faint.' Commanding the tone, imperative the manner in which he held her. Within seconds she was managing to produce a wan little smile.

'I'm fine now. Thank you very much, Luke.' She felt at peace, so safe and comfortable, here on the couch with Luke's strong arm about her. 'I'm so sorry to be such a nuisance.'

'You're sure you're feeling better?' he wanted to know, ignoring her last remark. 'If you are I'll go along to the kitchen and get you something to eat. You had scarcely anything at dinner time.'

She blinked at him.

'How do you know?'

'I'm not blind,' was the caustic rejoinder. And then, 'Oh, yes, I was aware also that you pretended to eat, but what you took on your fork wouldn't have satisfied a child.'

'I wasn't hungry,' she owned, amazed that he should have been so interested as to watch what she was eating. 'But I am a little hungry now.'

'Good. Would you like some coffee with your sandwiches?'

She smiled at him as he straightened up, acutely conscious of the fact that his arm had been removed from her back.

'Yes, please,' she said. 'A milky one, if you don't mind?'

'Not at all; a milky one it shall be.'

On his return with the tray Melanie inquired about the aunts.

'I'm going back for them,' he told her. 'It wasn't fair to expect them to come home at this hour. They're having the time of their lives.'

'They are?' Melanie had picked up a sandwich, but it was now poised half-way to her mouth. 'But Aunt Cissy said she wasn't going to dance.'

'She was certainly dancing when I came away,' he said with some amusement. 'She and Aunt Gertrude have found themselves two nice elderly English gentlemen who are on holiday here—at least,' he amended, 'they're touring in a Land-Rover and decided to stop overnight in Rayneburg, so they naturally attended the dance.' He paused, taking possession of a chair close to the couch, and he watched her for a moment as she bit into the sandwich. 'You know, Melanie, if you weren't so stupid you'd have been with us, and you wouldn't have had the scare, either.'

'I know.' She fell silent, wondering whether he was considering her a nuisance. 'I'm sorry, Luke, that you had to come home.'

He said slowly,

'And I'm glad that I did. I'm glad, too, that you didn't add that I had no need to have come.'

'No, I wouldn't dream of saying that, because it wouldn't be true. I've already admitted that I was relieved to see your car out there.'

'Why were you at the window anyway?'

'I kept wanting to know what was going on outside.'

'Nothing goes on outside—unless we have a marauding tiger, and then we all go out to get him.'

'A tiger?' Once again her sandwich was poised as she stared at him with wide frightened eyes. 'I didn't think you had tigers in Africa?'

'We call leopards tigers,' he explained. 'Sometimes we have one about, but as I've said, we all go out, with guns, of course, to catch him.'

'Is he dangerous?'

'He comes after the sheep and, unlike a lion who kills only when he's hungry and intends to eat his kill, the leopard will kill for the sheer joy of it, as will your English fox. I lost no less than sixteen sheep one night. We got the leopard, but not until a week later when he came along to try his luck again.'

Melanie took her coffee from the tray and began to drink it, her mind confused by this change in her own attitude towards Luke. She tried at first to explain it by the simple truth that she had been so glad to see him that gratitude was now her dominant emotion. But, strangely, it was more than gratitude that affected her at this time. She was in a mood of pleasant acceptance of his presence; she *liked* being here, on the couch, with Luke not very far away.

'I expect I'm not yet myself,' she murmured, quite unaware that she had spoken her thoughts aloud, unaware, that was, until she heard him say,

'You still feel groggy? Would you like to lie down for half an hour or so before we go out?'

'We?'

'I'm not leaving you alone a second time,' he told her grimly. 'When I remembered that it was Elizabeth's night off and I decided to come back at once, it was my intention to go along to the native village and bring Elizabeth back before I left for Rayneburg to pick the aunts up, but now that I've seen how you are I have no intention of leaving you.'

'I'll be all right if Elizabeth's here,' she assured him.

'Yes, if you'll go along and fetch her--' She came to a slow but definite stop on seeing his expression. 'All right,' she said, 'I'll come to Rayneburg with you.'

He glanced at his watch.

'Do you want a rest first?'

Melanie shook her head. The sandwiches and coffee had done wonders for her, she told him.

'And the fresh air will do the rest,' was his answer as, rising, he took up the tray and disappeared through the door. On his return Melanie was standing up.

'I'm fine,' she asserted, a little surprised that she wasn't weak in the legs. She looked up at him, her eyes soft and limpid and faintly pleading. 'Don't tell the aunts that I fainted, will you?'

He shook his head.

'Not if you don't want me to,' he promised.

'Thanks a lot.' He was ready to go, but she hesitated. 'And thank you for—for—everything,' she murmured, and Luke, although exhibiting some measure of perplexity at this rather cryptic sentence, asked no question at all but merely took her arm and, reaching the car, helped her in and tucked a rug around her legs and feet.

'Comfy?' he inquired as he slid into the driver's seat.

'Beautifully comfy,' was her swift and frank reply.

What she didn't mention was that, for the first time in weeks, she no longer felt the leaden weight of dejection dragging at her senses.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT was four days later that Kevin called with his young daughter. Melanie was in the garden, spread out on the finely-cut lawn, sunning herself, when she looked up on hearing the car. The aunts were having an afternoon nap and as Luke was out somewhere among the citrus trees Melanie naturally got up, grabbing the beach robe that lay on the grass beside her, and donning it over her rather scanty sunsuit.

'Hello.' Kevin spoke before she had time to do so. 'You're Melanie, Luke's cousin. He told me about you; you're here with your aunt.'

'Yes, that's right. We're here on a month's holiday.' She flung out a hand in a little helpless gesture. 'I don't quite know where Luke is. Was he expecting you?'

'No; I was going into Rayneburg and decided to make a detour and drop in on him.'

'Can I offer you anything—er—a drink?'

'I'll be glad of one,' he answered, and then, looking down at the pretty, fair-haired child at his side, 'Say hello to Melanie. This is my daughter, Deborah.'

'Hello, Deborah.' Melanie smiled and took the small hand which was extended to her.

'I want to see Uncle Luke.' The child glanced all around; it was plain that she felt shy with Melanie. 'Where is he?'

'I'll get Elizabeth to bring your drink on to the stoep,' offered Melanie. 'And then I'll send Gladstone to see if he can find Luke.' Gladstone, she had noticed, was in the kitchen garden, pulling up weeds that had sprung up after the rain.

'Thank you, Melanie.' Kevin, a man of about thirty- ' eight years of age, was of average height and weight; he had a look of sadness on his tanned face and his grey ey^s were shadowed. Deborah too seemed sad and thoughtful; she held tightly to her father's hand as they walked over to the stoep.

'Would you like coffee, or something stronger? If so, perhaps you'd help yourself, as I'm not sure where everything is. And Elizabeth is not allowed to touch the intoxicants.'

'Coffee will be fine. And for Deborah a glass of lemonade if you have it?'

'I'll tell Elizabeth.'

'Is Uncle Luke coming?' she heard the child ask as she went from the stoep into the house to ring the bell. 'I want to talk to him, Daddy.'

'So you shall, darling. Melanie will find him for you.'

On her return Melanie was able to inform Kevin that Gladstone knew exactly where to find his master and so Luke should be appearing within the next ten minutes or so.

Meanwhile Melanie sat with the visitors and tried to chat with the child. And after a short while she did manage to make some headway and after that it was quite easy.

'I'm going to stay with Uncle Luke while my daddy's away in England,' she told Melanie, but her father interrupted to say,

'We're not quite sure, pet. If Uncle Luke's too busy then he can't have you--' He tailed off and a small sigh escaped him. His eyes were troubled, and thoughtful; he moistened his lips once or twice as if he were under the effect of some nervous complaint.

'Can I come with you, then?' Deborah was asking.

'I'd like to go to England and see my other uncle.'

Melanie looked at her as she picked up the glass and took a drink of the lemonade. The pale gold hair was long but tied back with a blue ribbon; the eyes were a deep blue, large and widely-spaced. A little retroussé nose and a pointed chin, a clear pale skin--Altogether a very attractive child, was Melanie's assessment.

'Ah, here's Luke now!' from Kevin, and Deborah clapped her hands together as she turned her head to see him cantering along the drive at the end of which Kevin's car was parked. A few seconds later Deborah was being swung high into the air and, watching him, Melanie felt a strange, restless sensation which she failed utterly to comprehend.

'And how's my best girl?' demanded Luke as he held her above his head. 'Been good for your daddy?'

'I'm always good,' she laughed. 'Aren't I, Daddy?'

What a change in the child, thought Melanie as the laughter of both Deborah and her captor rang out. She was certainly very fond of Luke, and very much at home with him. At length he put her back on her feet.

'I see that you've been looked after,' remarked Luke approvingly as he noticed the empty coffee cup and glass. 'Melanie's been doing the honours. Thank you,' he added, glancing at her. She flushed a little and lowered her long lashes.

'I'm glad you could be found,' she murmured, rising to go. 'I myself had no idea where you were, but Gladstone knew.'

Luke merely nodded his head; he was interested in what she was wearing and she instinctively hitched the fronts of her beach robe together. The shaft of a smile touched his lips and her colour fluctuated.

'Are you going?' he asked when she began to move. 'There's no need for you to do so.'

'I want to get dressed,' was her reply, and Luke shrugged his shoulders. But then he said, 'What do you think of our little Deborah?'

'She's—charming.'

Kevin interposed, 'Don't flatter her Melanie; she delights in it.'

'Melanie's nice,' interrupted Deborah. 'I like her very much.'

'Thank you, Deborah,' returned Melanie with a swift spontaneous smile. 'Shall I come back when I'm dressed?'

'Yes, please, and we can go and look at the flowers.'

'Very well; I'll not be long.' Conscious of Luke's eyes on her, she seemed compelled to glance his way. She could not help but note the question in his eyes and she turned away quickly, fearing she might weaken and consent to remain and take care of the child.

She was almost dressed when there was a quiet knock on her door.

'Come in,' she called, expecting to see Elizabeth, or perhaps her aunt. It was Luke, and she glanced down with some dismay at the dainty underslip she wore. 'Oh ...!'

'Put something on,' he said without so much as an apology for the intrusion. 'Here--' Having picked up the beach robe he tossed it unceremoniously at her. 'I want to talk to you.'

'If it's about Deborah,' she began, when he interrupted her.

'You know very well it is. Melanie, I'm asking you once again—will you stay for a couple of months and look after her? No, don't interrupt yet,' he almost snapped as she raised a protesting hand to stop him. 'I've had a word with your aunt and she's willing to go along once a week and see to your flat—to put some heat on for an hour or two and make sure everything's all right.' He stopped then and waited, his austere features set and yet faintly drawn with anxiety. 'Apart from anything else,' he continued when she did not speak, 'you'll be doing something fine, something noble. That child needs a woman, Melanie, and it so happens that fate has willed it that you happen to be here at this particular time.' Again he waited. 'Well?' he said impatiently when a few silent moments had passed.

She had put on the bathrobe, but she still felt inadequately dressed. However, he had other things on his mind than the female figure and she felt her blush fade as she and he stood staring at one another.

'I really don't want to stay--'

'You're refusing?' His eyes raked, and there was a bite to his voice.

She felt an onrush of guilt and was angry because of it.

'Although I'm sorry for both Deborah and her father, I don't see that their misfortune's my affair.'

'I see!' His face became an unpleasant mask. 'That is your final word?'

'Luke, I do wish you'd try to understand - '

'Was that your final word?' he interrupted impatiently.

'You're making me feel dreadfully guilty,' she complained. 'After all, it's only chance that I'm here at all.'

His eyes flickered over her contemptuously.

'You have an opportunity of doing something good and fine, as I've said, and yet you turn it down, for no reason at all that I can see.'

Melanie bit her lip till it hurt. It was a most strange thing, but while one half of her was more than willing to do as he asked simply because she was so sorry for those two out there, the other half of her was sending out warning lights, telling her to beware, instilling in her an acute sense of danger.

'I don't know what to do,' she quivered. 'My conscience tells me that I should stay, but--'

'In that case, stay,' he broke in firmly. 'Because if you don't, then that conscience is going to trouble you for a very long time to come!'

It was the middle of November and Melanie and Deborah were sitting under a mango tree, Deborah with her chin in her hands and Melanie leaning against the trunk of the tree, reading to her. Earlier they had been into Rayneburg—Melanie driving the ranch wagon with which she was now familiar—where they had bought, among other things, several glossy children's books and also some paints with which to colour some of the pictures which had been left specially for this purpose. There had been heavy rain recently and the tributary of the Limpopo River was now a pretty stream with shining water dancing over the boulders and thick vegetation growing along its banks. The swallow hole farther upstream could no longer take the volume and so the surplus water was allowed to flow on, rushing down a steep gradient before reaching the area which ran through Luke's rich and fertile farmlands.

'I wish we could go into town again,' Deborah said when at last the story of the 'White Princess' was finished. 'I want to see if there's a letter from my daddy.'

'We asked this morning,' Melanie reminded her. 'I doubt very much if there'll be one today now. We'll go again tomorrow, I promise.'

But when they got back to the homestead and Luke heard of the child's desire to go into town again he himself offered to drive in.

'We'll all go,' he decided, 'in the car.'

'I like going in the ranch wagon, Uncle Luke, with Melanie driving.'

'You're going in the car, with me driving.'

'Oh, all right. But can I sit in the front with you both?'

'Of course; you're only a little one.' But as he said this his eyes travelled to Melanie and she flushed as he slid them over her slender graceful figure. 'Yes, just a little one.'

What was happening to her that she could be happy like this? she was asking herself as she sat in the front of the car, with Deborah between her and Luke. Robin seemed totally unimportant; in fact, his face was becoming vague and she had to work hard when on occasions she wished to see a clear picture before her. It must be the job she was doing, she told herself, the worthwhile job of caring for a motherless child while her father was away. On his return, he had told Luke, he intended employing a white nanny for the child, and he added that, while he was in England, he would probably advertise for someone.

'The mail has come, after all.' Luke had gone into the office and he emerged holding several envelopes, one of which he handed to Deborah and one to Melanie.

'It'll be from Aunt Cissy,' she said, her eyes lighting up. But their light faded instantly as she saw the handwriting.

'Something wrong?' Luke asked, forgetting about his own mail for the moment.

She nodded, her throat having gone dry so that speech was delayed.

'It's from my sister,' she told him.

'The sister?'

'I've only one. Romaine, who took Robin from me.'

'And Giles,' murmured Luke, and automatically she nodded her head. She did not want to read the letter, and wished she could destroy it. Yet it must contain something of vital importance, simply because it would never otherwise have been sent, not with things being as they were between the sisters. There had been the initial rift, which was bad enough, but this latest act of Romaine's had, as far as Melanie was concerned, meant a complete break; she wanted nothing more to do with her sister. 'Come on into the cafe and you can read it. Deborah, leave yours a moment, and we'll find a comfortable place to sit.'

This was done in no time at all and while Deborah sat quietly in a corner reading the long letter her father had sent, Melanie was reading hers.

'They've split up,' she said at last, and Luke jerked his head, again forgetting his own mail.

'Robin and Romaine?'

She nodded, wondering if she were as pale as she felt.

'Romaine's written to say it was all a mistake and that she's sorry. Robin wants me back.'

'So--' The sensuous mouth hardened; the jaw went taut. 'And you—what do you think about the idea of picking up a whole lot of broken pieces and trying to put them together again?' The sarcasm in his voice could not possibly escape her but, strangely, it did not annoy her in any way at all.

'I can't come to a decision until I've thought about it.'

His eyes glinted, hard as agate.

'You're willing to think about it?'

Melanie shook her head impatiently.

'I'm confused, Luke. Please don't ask me any more questions about it.'

'As you wish,' he agreed, but his voice had an edge of steel—cold steel.

'I'd like lemonade, please.' Deborah's voice, speaking to the waitress standing by their table, cut into the uneasy atmosphere that had arisen between Luke and Melanie and Melanie gave a sigh of relief.

'What will you have?' Luke asked her coldly.

'Just a cup of coffee, please.' Why was she now so dejected after having been happy just a short while ago? She would still have been happy had not this letter arrived ... and so the thing to do was ignore it. Toss it away and pretend it had never arrived. She did just this, a waste-paper basket being conveniently placed by a potted conifer at the side of the table. 'Well,' she said with satisfaction, 'that's that!'

Luke glanced up from the letter he was reading.

'You've made your decision—so quickly?'

She nodded and smiled, little realizing how different she appeared from what he had seen in her face a few minutes ago.

'Yes, I have.'

'And you look as if you've shed a ten-ton load.'

'That's exactly how I feel!' Her lovely mouth curved and then her smile had spread to laughter. 'I'm free of him,' she said. 'Oh, but you have no idea what that letter has done to me!'

'If it's freed you, Melanie, then that's good news. I shall take you to the Club tonight, just to celebrate that freedom.'

Her eyes lit up.

'That's nice of you, Luke.'

'Just a cousinly gesture,' was the strangely caustic rejoinder.

'Thank you.' Her voice had lost a little of its verve, because of his tone and his expression and because he had instantly dropped his eyes to his letter again.

'What shall I wear?' she was asking herself later when, having bathed Deborah and put her snugly into bed, she had read to her for a while before putting out the light in the dainty little bedroom which the child occupied. 'I think my plain black velvet skirt and my white lace blouse.'

Luke's eyes flickered over her as she came down to the hall where he was waiting for her, looking far too attractive in casual slacks and a white safari jacket. His thick hair was brushed back, but even as she

looked an unruly lock came forward and carelessly he flicked a finger under it, but he had no sooner put it back than it had fallen again.

'You look wonderful,' he told her, and yet, somehow, she thought she detected a hint of mockery in the compliment. Unfathomable man, who could change moods so swiftly. He baffled her in his manner towards her which, though still that of the host in his concern for her comfort, was also one of faint familiarity, a familiarity which she shied from, remembering the incident of the kiss, which occurred very early in their acquaintanceship. He had obviously enjoyed it and he could one day decide he would like a repetition—and this she meant to avoid. There would be no affairs for her, however superficial and fleeting. She was finished with men for ever; the realm of love and romance and marriage was not for her, simply because she had no intention of embarking on the journey that would take her there.

'Thank you, Luke,' she said, forcing a smile. 'I'm sorry to have kept you waiting.'

'It's of no matter. I expect Deborah took a great deal of your time?'

'She likes me to read to her for a while, and I couldn't disappoint her just because we were going out.'

'I've given Elizabeth instructions to listen for her; she'll not wander off or anything like that.'

The car was standing at the front door and within half an hour of getting into it they were at the Club, having driven along a road where one or two stately white bungalows had recently been built, and farther along, some palm-shaded huts where Africans lived. The night was cool but not cold, the sky star-spangled with a new moon hanging in the great purple vault of the sky. As they got out of the car

a wispy cloud spun a veil right overhead and the stars behind it took on the appearance of a handful of pearls.

'What a glorious evening!' someone was remarking as they too got out of a car. Someone else spoke and there was a general air of jollity as laughter rang out from the babble of voices, both male and female.

Luke helped her from the car and closed the door.

'A drink first?' he asked as he guided her into the lounge. Several people hailed him, and nodded to Melanie, whom they knew because she had been to the Club with Luke and the two aunts several times since that night of terror when she had vowed never to be left alone again.

'Heard from Kevin?' asked a bronzed South African fruit grower, Jan Woebecker.

'Yes, and so has Deborah.'

'Sad business. Will he get a nurse for the child?'

'He has that idea in mind. Melanie, what would you like?'

She told him and they took their drinks over to a table which at first they had to themselves, but within a few minutes they had been joined by Edward and Jancis, whom Melanie had met previously at a Club dance.

'How nice to see you!' exclaimed Jancis. 'Can we sit here?'

'Please do.' Luke had risen and was now asking what they were drinking. While he was away Edward became caught up with one of his friends and Melanie found herself alone with Jancis.

'How's Deborah?' asked Jancis conversationally. 'I expect she's missing her daddy.'

'Definitely; she asks about him every day. But she's not unhappy, which is a blessing.'

'You're very modest, Melanie. We all know how much you're doing for the child.' Melanie merely coloured and Jancis went on to explain, 'Luke's told us all about it. He thinks you're doing a wonderful job.' The girl looked oddly at her and then, 'How do you find him—Luke, I mean?'

Melanie looked at her with a puzzled expression.

'I don't understand?'

'He's so impenetrable, with his armour of arrogance and air of superiority. Oh, I know he's your cousin, but you must be regarding him in the light of a *man* for all that.'

Melanie laughed and said,

'He is a man, so how else would I regard him?'

'You know what I mean. If I were living in the same house as him I'd either break him or be broken myself. I have tried from time to time, but--' Helplessly Jancis spread her hands. 'I've never made any headway, so I've come to the conclusion that only rare and porcelain-like beauty can melt him.'

'What makes you say a thing like that?' Melanie's thoughts flew to Romaine—whose beauty had been described as 'porcelain-like' by a well-known portrait painter in England.

'Well, because he did once fall for a girl like that.'

'He did?' Melanie wondered why she was so interested in Luke's past love-affair.

'Yes; she came from Scotland, I think, to spend a winter here with some relatives who have now left these parts. She and Luke were seen together all the time and it was fully expected that he would marry her, but something happened and the next thing we knew was that she had gone home, and she never came back.'

'When was this?'

'About three or four years ago. I must admit that I was glad it fell through because I then felt I had a chance again—I'd been doing a bit of chasing before this rare beauty appeared—but he wouldn't fall. He reverted right back to the unreachable god who sits high on his pedestal and won't even bend to let you touch him.'

'So he's been in love--'

'Unbelievable as it seems, yes, he has!'

Luke came back and the four of them chatted casually. Then Melanie found herself in Luke's arms, following him as if they'd danced together all their lives. He seemed happy, content; she knew she was happy, and at peace with the whole world.

They danced together for most of the time and then, just before the end, Luke said they would go outside to take a breath of fresh air before the last dance, which was a waltz.

'What a lovely evening I've had!' she told him enthusiastically. 'I can't think how I've recovered so quickly, not when it took me three years—and more— over Giles.' So easily she could talk about those two who had let her down!

'But you didn't have any help the first time.'

'That's true. Coming here has certainly been good for me.'

'And now you're almost ready for that third time I mentioned.'

She stiffened and the blood within her seemed to freeze. 'I most certainly am not! I meant what I said about never letting a man hurt me again. What kind of a fool do you take me for?' She had stopped, under a high palm tree, and Luke was beside her, tall and austere as he looked down and saw her face in the dim light that had escaped from an uncurtained window of the Club.

'My mistake,' he said crisply. 'Bad joke, wasn't it?'

'Exceedingly bad.'

A silence fell, uncomfortable and long. Melanie knew a sense of loss; she knew anger too, anger against Luke for saying something which had spoiled the pleasure she was experiencing. The night was no longer magic—even the sky was losing its starry splendour as soaring domes of cumulo-nimbus clouds gathered with ominous intent.

'It's going to rain,' she mentioned, quite unnecessarily but for something to say. Luke continued to walk on, his eyes staring at nothing in particular. 'I think we ought to go back.'

'If that's what you want,' and without more ado he swung round and began to retrace his steps, striding out so swiftly this time that she had to skip to keep pace with him.

They re-entered the Club and danced the last waltz; Melanie spoke to him several times but received monosyllables in reply, and she eventually abandoned the attempt to re-create the happy atmosphere which had prevailed before they had gone outside for that stroll.

'Thank you for taking me,' she said when they had arrived back at the homestead.

His gaze was stony as he replied, 'Think nothing of it. I hope you enjoyed it.'

'Of course.' She knew she was not convincing. 'It was a most pleasant change.'

His mouth curved in a sort of mocking half-sneer.

'You're remembering to be polite all at once.'

Melanie said bluntly, 'You spoiled it by mentioning my readiness for another gamble with love.'

'Gamble?' His stony gaze was riveted upon her. 'Is that how you regard it?'

'It's most certainly a gamble,' she asserted, 'and one at which I could never be the winner.'

Impatience was written all over his face.

'Isn't that an assumption which is rather absurd?'

It was Melanie's turn to exhibit impatience.

'It might appear absurd to you, but to me it's logical that I should have come to the conclusion that I'm unlucky in love.'

He said nothing for a moment and she dwelt for a space on what Jancis had told her about Luke's own love affair. Perhaps he was thinking about it at this present time, since his expression was so grim.

'You're a strange girl,' was all he said. He and she were in the sitting-room and the curtains were wide apart; a flash of lightning warned of the storm that was to come. 'You've allowed yourself to

become so embittered by these two experiences that you can't even see straight.'

She looked up at him. What exactly did he mean by that?

'I admit I'm embittered—and so would you be,' she added indignantly as he lifted his brows on hearing her first words. 'What makes it all worse is that in both cases it was my own sister who caused the break.'

'Your sister--' He appeared to be diverted by this.

'What is she like?' he asked, at the same time looking intently at her, examining every feature of her face— the high cheekbones, the flawless skin, the lovely blue eyes, limpid in the shaded light coming from the solitary wall light on the opposite side of the room.

'Very beautiful.' She paused a moment before deciding to add, 'Hers is a beauty usually described as the rare, porcelain-like beauty. A portrait painter once described her in that way.'

His eyes flickered and she wondered if her words had re-created the memory of another girl with that particular kind of beauty. This time his face showed no sign of the grimness that had possessed it a few moments ago, but his expression could certainly be described as reflective.

'You do know,' he said at last, 'that you yourself possess a rare kind of beauty?'

She started, and then coloured daintily. His expression changed rapidly and what she saw there brought an even deeper flush to her cheeks.

'I'm ... passable,' she managed to say, and at the rather scolding lift of his eyebrow she added, 'That's how I always describe myself.'

'Ah—how *you* describe yourself. But then, Melanie, you are not in a position to judge.'

'Are you trying to flatter me, Luke?'

'I'm stating a fact.'

She shook her head to throw off that statement.

'I'm not what anyone would describe as beautiful.'

'You have no faith in my assessment, then?' The eyes were brown now, and narrowed.

'That's a difficult question, Luke. If I say no then you'll accuse me of impoliteness; if I say yes then surely I'm immodest?'

He laughed unexpectedly.

'You're an obstinate child, Melanie, and I do think the day will come when I shall carry out my threat.'

'Threat?' she blinked. 'What threat?'

'To beat you, for I'm certain it's the only way to deal with a girl like you.'

Her cheeks, already fused with colour, became hotter than ever.

'You wouldn't dare to touch me!'

'That's too confident a statement by far, let me warn you. If you continue to crouch inside your little walled-in fortress then I shall set about blowing it up--' He paused to wag a long brown finger at her. 'And in the process, my little one, you're going to get hurt! And I'm not so sure that I oughtn't to begin right now!' And although her

nerves instantly sprang to the alert she had no time to benefit from the warning as, with as little heed for gentleness as on that previous occasion, he had jerked her to him and, taking her chin in a ruthless grip, he pressed his lips to hers. As before, she began to struggle, but Luke was even more forceful now than he was then and her action seemed to infuriate him. 'You'll get hurt, I'm warning you!' he said between his teeth before his cruel mouth crushed hers again. 'And I'm also warning you that you'll reciprocate!' he told her as at length he held her from him.

Melanie was fighting for breath, but his eyes remained hard; she put a soothing finger to her lips but the action only served to bring a smile of mocking triumph to his mouth. Her slender body quivered in his arms, but his reaction was merely to tighten his hold unmercifully. Thoroughly shaken, Melanie thought for a second of Robin, who, not being romantic, had kissed her without passion or desire. This man's kisses possessed both ... and in no mean quantities either!

She said quietly when at length he decided to release her,

'I shall never reciprocate; and in fact, I can't see why you should want me to. If it's an affair you want you should find someone with more to offer than I.' She turned from him and moved away towards the door. 'I can't leave Deborah now,' she said, and her voice trembled as the tears trickled down on to her cheeks. 'But I might as well tell you that, had I known what I know now, I would never have consented to stay in the first place.'

Coldly he looked at her, and she did wonder how he could be so heartless.

'I'd kissed you before then,' was his stiffly-spoken reminder.

'I didn't expect there'd be a repetition.'

'No?' He seemed to give a small sigh, but she could not be sure of this. 'Then you're even more stupid than I thought you were.'

She frowned; there was some subtle implication in this, she knew, but being so shaken by the scene just enacted, and so utterly tired and dejected, she merely bade him a curt good night and left the room.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHETHER or not Luke had been worrying about the possibility of her going back on her word about not leaving Deborah, Melanie did not know, but just before lunch time the following day he approached her as She was in the garden, with Deborah at her side, picking some french beans. They were for the evening meal and as it was a pleasant task Melanie often went out and gathered the vegetables which Gladstone grew with such care and pride.

'I'd like to speak to you,' he said, glancing at the child. 'Deborah, run along inside to Elizabeth.'

'Now, Uncle Luke?'

'Yes, now.'

Without another word Deborah went, and Melanie, straightening up at last, nervously smoothed her dress —just for something to do. Her face was flushed by the memory of last night; her eyes were just a little too bright.

'I want to say that I'm sorry,' was the surprising manner in which he began. 'It was inexcusable of me to treat you like that. I ask your pardon.'

She looked up into his austere countenance, wondering just what the apology had cost him. A great deal, she suspected, and swiftly on this came the probable reason for the apology.

'I wouldn't have left,' she said in a low and husky tone. 'So you needn't have worried.'

He seemed to swallow hard before saying, 'Am I forgiven, Melanie?'

'Of course.'

'You were so happy at the dance, and then I spoiled it.' He was not in any way humble, yet undoubtedly he was in a softer mood than usual. And now she grasped it all! He was being kind again—after having forgotten his aunt's request for him to make life easy for her. She supposed that on both those occasions when he had treated her so abominably he had been in the kind of mood where he wanted to do a little petting ... and she, Melanie, had just happened to be there—on hand, as it were.

'Are you going into Rayneburg at all today?' she asked, anxious to change the subject. 'Deborah wants to buy some wool. She's suddenly decided to knit you a scarf.'

'Me?' He shook his head. 'I don't want a scarf.'

'Oh, yes, you do. Deborah's knitting you one, so of course you want it.'

'Of course,' he agreed, and then, 'I wasn't going into town, but I can do. Are you coming as well?'

'Not if you're going. I'd have gone had you been too busy.'

'What are you going to do, then?'

'Wash my hair for a start.'

'So my taking Deborah off your hands will give you a little time to yourself?' He frowned and added, 'I should have thought of this before---'

'It doesn't matter. I manage to get through all my own little jobs without much trouble. Besides, it won't be for much longer now.'

Silence—strange and uncomfortable. Melanie looked up to see the most odd expression on Luke's face. And for one unaccountable

moment she had the most convincing notion that he did not want her to leave ... not ever....

'What time do you want me to take her?' he asked brusquely. 'I can't go immediately after lunch, but I shall be free from about two-thirty on.'

'That'll be fine. Any time which suits you.'

Lunch was a far more pleasant meal than breakfast had been, as then Melanie and Luke weren't on speaking terms and it was Deborah's voice that was heard throughout the meal. But now Luke and Melanie chatted—just as if nothing untoward had happened so very recently, she thought. They were on the stoep at the back of the house; it was cool and the fresh breeze blew along its length. The lunch was a typical South African one of fresh grapefruit followed by pumpkin soup. Cape snoek was the fish course and then lamb cutlets, sweet potatoes and fried eggplant rings—these with a green salad which was followed by corn on the cob flavoured with butter and salt and pepper. Luscious paw-paw was the sweet, being served with lemon juice and sugar.

'Ooh, that was good!' exclaimed Deborah, patting her stomach. 'I think I'll go out and play now.' She glanced at Luke. 'Please may I leave the table?' she asked primly as she noted his expression. He nodded his head.

'You may. Be ready to go out when Melanie calls you.'

'Yes; I won't go far.' Off she went, singing to herself and when she was out of earshot Luke said seriously,

'Thank you, Melanie, for staying.'

She was unable to answer, yet she could not have said why. Her throat felt blocked; her thoughts flitted about and she saw herself

getting ready to leave, saw Luke taking her to the railway station, saying goodbye--She was on the plane, flying away ... never to return. She frowned at these thoughts and endeavoured to distract her mind by an interested contemplation of the garden with its glorious riot of colour—cannas, bougainvillaeas, English roses, hibiscus bios-soms and the fiery red-gold of the flowers of the flamboyant tree. The sun was high and as its rays filtered through the waving palm fronds undulating patterns of light and shade streaked across the velvet lawn. The melodious sound of the houseboy singing mingled with the whining of cicadas and the breeze as it drifted between the leaves of the vine that shaded the stoep. Over the veld, heat shimmered, and the mountains burned in the sun. Melanie, suddenly acutely conscious of a strange and baffling emotion rising uncontrollably within her, became staggered by the knowledge that she had no urgent desire to leave here, after all. It was so beautiful a land despite its many disadvantages. But she liked the isolation, the warmth of the sun on her body, the balmy evenings and flaring sky at dawn. She was happy living in such a luxurious house, happy when in the garden, or walking beside the river bed. Happy--

'What are you thinking, Melanie?' Luke was sitting back in his chair, one leg bent and resting on the knee of the other. His hand gripped his ankle tightly and she noticed the veins standing out between knuckles and wrist. 'You look so very serious.'

She hesitated, unwilling to confess the truth. But after a moment she shrugged and said frankly, 'I was thinking how happy I am here.'

His eyes widened.

'But only an hour or two ago you implied that you were impatient to leave?'

'Yes, and I suppose I am ... and yet--'

'You've changed your mind?' he asked curiously.

'Not exactly-- In any case, I couldn't stay indefinitely. But I am growing to love this place.'

"The house, you mean?"

'That as well.'

'As well as what?'

'The countryside. And I love the sun, and even the rain.' She looked at him in some bewilderment. 'I supposed a country like this, with its mystery and magic and exotic flowers and trees, gets hold of you and you know that when you leave there'll be a wrench, just as if you're pulling up roots that have grown despite your initial conviction that nothing of this nature could possibly happen.' She had no idea why she spoke like this; it was too intimate by far. Her intention must always be to hold on to her reserve where Luke was concerned—although she felt sure he would never again give her reason to fear his attentions.

'So you've already sent down roots?'

She moistened her lips, reluctant to be drawn deeper into this subject.

'I suppose I must have done,' she admitted at last.

'I wonder why?'

'I can't explain, even to myself.' She stirred uneasily on her chair. 'It isn't an easy thing to explain, Luke. All I know is that I shall remember this all my life.'

His eyes were inscrutable, yet she had the impression that beneath the cool unruffled exterior there burned a strong emotion.

'Something is disturbing you,' he stated, but she shook her head immediately.

'Nothing is disturbing me,' she returned, and to her relief the conversation ended there because Deborah, tired of what she had been doing, came on to the stoep to say,

'Melanie, please come and play with me, until Uncle Luke's ready to take me shopping.'

The next fortnight passed uneventfully in one way, but in another it was memorable. For during that time a sincere friendship had grown up between Melanie and Luke. They would walk together of an evening when Deborah was in bed; they danced at the Club, attended parties given by the neighbours, gave a small dinner party themselves, with Melanie helping 'just as if she were the lady of the house' Luke had said, but teasingly. For Melanie there were moments of great pleasure ... and there were moments when there would creep over her an indefinable longing ... and a desire. She was proud to be with Luke when they visited or went to the Club; she was content to be with him on those evenings when they sat on the stoep in the cool of the summer evening—for the South African summer was well under way now—talking quietly, just the two of them. Luke asked about her life—her childhood and later. She found herself keeping nothing back. For his part, Luke also confided, but he was never quite without reserve and it was as if he were guarded in his every word, his every act. Sometimes—especially when she mentioned her intention of never taking any more chances with men—he would adopt a satirical or mocking mood; sometimes his mood would be a teasing one, but on occasions it would be almost tender. And it was at these times that Melanie would know a recurrence of that yearning, that strange desire which defied interpretation. Confused, she would lie awake at night and make a concentrated effort to reason out the cause

of her troublesome emotions. And, just as she was giving up, there would invariably come to her those scenes when Luke had forced his kisses upon her. She would feel them again, but they were never quite so rough, nor were his arms quite so hurtful, as they had been at the time.

It was in early December that the letter arrived, the letter which not only threw her into confusion but which also seemed to tell her that the pleasant days she had known were definitely at an end.

'What on earth's wrong?' demanded Luke, rather anxiously as he noted her sudden pallor and the way the letter fluttered in her hands. 'Bad news ... from your aunt?'

She shook her head, dazedly staring up at him.

'Romaine's coming here—and Robin.'

A frown that was almost a scowl appeared on his brow.

'Whatever for?'

'I can't think what they hope to gain,' she faltered. 'But Romaine says that, as she's the cause of the break, and that as Robin wants me back, it's her duty to do something about putting things right between Robin and me, so she's taking her holiday now, and so is Robin.'

Luke's eyes narrowed.

'They want to come here—to stay in this house?'

'Romaine hasn't said so. I expect they'll stay in Rayneburg.'

'This sudden decision results from your ignoring the previous plea,' he said almost to himself. 'Perhaps it would have been better if you'd

replied to this Robin's letter, telling him once and for all that you're finished.'

'It's too late now,' she told him. 'They're arriving on Monday--'

'Next Monday?' he cut in. 'No, it can't be!'

'The day after tomorrow,' she said, glancing again at the date which Romaine had given. 'There isn't time to stop them, is there?'

'Not now.' He held out a hand. 'May I look at the letter?'

'Of course.' It changed hands and for a space there was silence in the room. Melanie's eyes brooded; she was thinking of Romaine's perfidy, and of the attitude of indifference which she had adopted on that first occasion when she had told Melanie that she and Giles were in love.

'We couldn't help it,' she had told her sister with, a careless shrug of her beautiful shoulders. 'We both tried to fight it, but really it was silly of us, because we knew all the time that we were meant for each other.'

The divorce, wondered Melanie—was it still going through, or had Romaine decided that it was Giles she wanted after all?

'You're right about the date of their arrival,' said Luke as he handed back the letter. 'I thought you must surely have made a mistake.'

'I don't want them to come.' Melanie looked at him with eyes shadowed by distress. 'Romaine and I mean nothing to each other any more.'

'And Robin?' he inquired brusquely, his keen scrutiny watching for any signs of a change of expression.

'He means nothing to me any more--' She stopped, aware suddenly of a sensation of insecurity and doubt, and she knew that during the past two weeks she had been growing so close to Luke that she had come—almost unconsciously—to rely upon him, to feel sure that if anything went wrong he would be there to put it right. He had become a prop, but now he seemed a world apart, and all because Robin had been mentioned. Why should Luke erect a barrier? Or was it she herself who was erecting a barrier? 'I don't want them to come,' she cried with urgency in her voice. 'Why should I have to be troubled by them?'

'You've no need to be troubled by them,' was Luke's quiet, unhurried comment. 'When they arrive you can state firmly that there's no room here for them and send them off to Rayneburg--'

"But they'll want to talk! That's the whole purpose of this visit.'

'True, that's their purpose, but it need not affect you.'

'I shall have to see them, Luke,' she murmured in despair, and all at once his arm was about her shoulders.

'No such thing, Melanie,' he said gently. 'If it isn't your wish to see them then all you have to do is give me the authority to send them way.'

She looked gratefully at him.

'Will you do that for me, Luke?'

'I shall be delighted to send them away,' was his grim rejoinder. 'They're not welcome, and therefore we shall let them see this.'

Melanie turned towards him, her face lifted as she gazed into his eyes—eyes that were definitely of a soft brown colour at this moment. Her heart seemed to contract and a smile quivered on her

lips. She felt safe again, secure because of his arm about her and the look in his eyes, and because there was about him something that stamped him as a protector.

'I'm most grateful to you,' she murmured. 'I feel as if a load has been taken off my shoulders.'

His smile was spontaneous; she had never seen him smile quite like this before.

'Dear Melanie, if I can take a load off your shoulders, at any time at all, then I shall be very happy to do so.'

Dear Melanie--Her heart contracted again; she knew a sort of exquisite pain ... and again that indefinable longing. What was it? she was asking when, quite without warning, she felt Luke's arm tighten around her and, quite without warning, he bent his head and kissed her gently on the lips.

'Oh ... I--' Confused, she twisted from his side, the colour fluctuating in her cheeks. Luke's eyes were almost tender as they settled on her face.

'Yes?' he prompted in some amusement on noticing her loss of poise.

'You—you shouldn't h-have kissed me like that.'

'No?' with a lift of his brows. 'You prefer my former technique?'

'No--' She lifted a hand to her cheek as the colour rose even higher. 'No, certainly not!'

He laughed, and flicked her hair carelessly with his hand. She noticed the attractive crinkly lines at the corners of his eyes.

'Little one,' he said softly, 'you're quite enchanting.'

What she would have said to this she did not know, for at that moment Deborah appeared on the scene and the intimate situation was brought to an abrupt end.

'What time will they be here?' Melanie was asking at eight o'clock on the Monday morning. 'I'm all on edge, Luke.' They were having breakfast together, Deborah having had a late night on the Sunday and in consequence being still asleep. 'You did tell me, but I've forgotten.'

'The plane was due to arrive at eleven o'clock last night, and I calculated that they would be another eleven hours getting here, so we should expect them around lunch time or even a little before.'

'They might have stayed the night somewhere.'

'I rather think that they'd sleep on the train. As I told you, I rang through and was told that there was a train which they could catch almost immediately after landing. It seems feasible that this is what they would do, having themselves worked out all these times beforehand. Your sister was sure of arriving here some time today.'

Melanie nodded, glancing at the clock.

'I wish I could add a few hours on to the time, for then it would be all over—the ordeal, I mean.'

'There isn't going to be any ordeal, Melanie. I shall see that you're spared any upset at all.'

Her eyes smiled at him across the table; she was so content to have him take the burden, and what was more it seemed the natural thing for him to do!

It was in fact almost three o'clock when the car turned into the drive and slid to a halt at the imposing front of the homestead. Melanie was

at a window of one of the bedrooms, her heart racing with almost sickening speed. She saw the driver get out, his intention being to inquire as to whether or not this was the right house, but Luke was there at once and within seconds Robin was out of the car and introducing himself to Luke. All he received as he held out a hand was a casual nod, the hand being totally ignored. Melanie could imagine him going red, and his temper rising. Where was Romaine? she wondered, puzzlement taking possession of her as Robin and Luke began talking to one another. And then Melanie saw that Romaine was actually in the car, but lying back against the cushions. Luke's glance into the car was followed by a spread of his hands and the next moment she heard him in the house. He called her name and she emerged from the room.

'Your sister's been taken ill in the hired car,' he informed her. 'She'll have to be brought in and a doctor sent for.' His tone was grim and so was his expression. Nevertheless, he was resigned to having Romaine and Robin in his house. 'There's nothing else for it, Melanie,' he said, 'for after all, she is your sister.'

She nodded her head.

'Under these circumstances there isn't anything else we can do, as you say. She isn't very ill, is she?'

'I can't say. She's just lying there and Robin says she's been complaining of stomach pains.'

'I see.' Melanie found that she was being torn between acute dislike of the idea of having Romaine here, and deep anxiety as to the cause of the pains. She followed Luke, her heart still racing. She dreaded the meeting with Robin and anger rose within her at his action in coming here, intruding into her life just at a time when all was running smoothly, when she was finding contentment and pleasure in the relationship which had grown up between Luke and herself.

'Melanie!' Robin came forward, hands outstretched, his whole attention with his former fiancée. 'My dear Melanie, forgive me--'

'Hadn't you better attend to this young woman?' broke in Luke curtly. 'If you and the driver will bring her inside I'll go and instruct my servant to prepare a bed.'

'What's wrong with her?' Melanie asked, thankful for Luke's interruption but at the same time aware that she herself was fast regaining her composure as far as her attitude towards Robin was concerned. She spoke to him now, going on to ask how long Romaine had been feeling unwell.

'This came on about an hour before we left the train,' he replied impatiently, his eyes still on Melanie's face. 'I suppose we ought to have done something about it then, but I was anxious to arrive here before dark.'

Melanie looked contemptuously at him, then went to the car. Romaine smiled weakly at her as she moved on the seat, towards the door which Melanie had opened for her.

'Didn't you care about Romaine, and the fact that she was in pain?' asked Melanie of Robin.

He shrugged, but before he had time to answer her Luke spoke again and the next moment had left Robin and the driver to see to Romaine.

Two or three minutes later Romaine was sitting on the couch in the living-room, looking all around her with appreciative eyes before, finally, she looked up into the handsome face of Luke Shadwell. And here her gaze remained fixed, and the beautiful lips curved in a smile as enchanting as ever. Robin was outside, paying the driver, and Melanie watched her sister intently as she made play with those enormous eyes of hers. Luke's face was impassive, yet Melanie could not for the life of her imagine his being immune to such incredible

beauty as that possessed by Romaine. And quite without warning her heart sank right into her feet. Romaine here ... Romaine, whose particular type of beauty was that most admired by Luke--

Where had she been drifting? Melanie was asking herself much later as she sat in the bath, perfumed soapsuds floating on the water all around her. She and Luke had come far in the past couple of weeks, and although it was not possible to measure the depth of their friendship, she now knew that this friendship was carrying her, by the most gentle and pleasant means, on to a far different relationship with the man who was, in effect, her employer.

And now Romaine was here.

Little beads of perspiration stood out on Melanie's forehead and she wiped them away with the sponge. They came again and she told herself that the water was too warm. But no, it was not that at all. Useless to deny that a great fear had entered into her, a fear of what Romaine could do to her, even yet again.

She must be kept warm and quiet, the doctor had said after giving Romaine an examination. There was nothing more serious than a touch of food poisoning that was already clearing up. Nevertheless, Romaine must not be moved for at least three or four days, the doctor had advised, and although Luke was angry about this he agreed to allow her to stay. But Robin he would not tolerate and without so much as an apology sent him off to find accommodation in Rayneburg. Robin had tried to insist on speaking to Melanie in private, but Luke had refused absolutely to listen, and the result was that Robin, after deciding that a show of temper would get him nowhere with a man like Luke, had gone away. But Melanie knew that he would endeavour to contact her in some way, perhaps tomorrow, by which time he would have hired a car which he himself could drive, rather than hiring a car with a driver as he had done when coming to the homestead in the first place.

Romaine stayed in bed for dinner that evening, but by lunch time the following day she was up and although her face was pale she appeared to be in reasonably good health. She ate a little food, watched by Luke who, Melanie noticed—or believed she noticed—was fascinated by Romaine's beauty. He certainly seemed unable to bring his attention from her, and Melanie, left to her own reflections, wondered just how long it would be before Luke found himself falling victim to her sister's undeniable charms.

This time, thought Melanie, there would at least be no humiliation, since she was, after all, only an employee of Luke's, the girl who had acceded to his request that she should extend her original stay in order to take care of Deborah. Yes, if Romaine *should* ensnare Luke their would be no humiliation such as had occurred twice in the past.

CHAPTER SIX

So determined was Melanie to be on the defensive that she never stopped to calculate the effect this changed manner of hers would have on Luke. All she did know was that the rather wonderful interlude was at an end, that a glance in the mirror told her that the sparkle in her eyes had died, leaving them dull and lifeless. Romaine's, on the other hand, were more attractive and expressive than ever as she made play with them at every opportunity when she was in Luke's company. Watching him and Romaine together Melanie began to convince herself that Romaine must captivate him—that she intended to do so, and in consequence Melanie herself withdrew, enclosing herself within a protective armour of coolness and indifference.

Robin arrived just before dinner, having had difficulty in hiring a car in Rayneburg. The maid let him in and came to Melanie to inform her that he was waiting in the sitting-room. Luke was out and Romaine languidly resting against the cushions in the big chair that had been put on to the stoep for her.

'Melanie--' His voice seemed to break after the one word was spoken, but he came towards her with outstretched hands.

'It isn't any use, Robin,' she returned without any thought of sparing him. 'I don't want anything more to do with you.'

He stared, his eyes as dull as hers.

'What have I done?' he cried, putting his hands to his face in a gesture of despair. 'That damned sister of yours caused it all! I can't think now how I came to beinfatuated with her. I should have known better, after what happened with Giles--'

'Shall we not go into this?' she interrupted in calm and quiet tones. 'Whatever the cause of the break, it can't make any difference to the

way I feel at the present time, I don't love you, Robin--' She stopped and looked directly into his face, waiting for him to complete the action of lowering his hands. They came to rest on his neck, and he stood there, a figure of dejection and despair. 'I mean that—I don't love you. So, you see, there isn't anything for us to discuss, is there?'

He swallowed hard, and allowed his hands to drop to his sides.

'I can't believe that a love like yours has died,' he said hoarsely. 'No, I can't believe it, no matter what you say.'

That he was deeply penitent was plain, and that he was suffering was equally plain, but Melanie felt no pity in her heart for him. But neither did she experience any resentment. She was thinking of Luke, and the way her life had changed since the friendship had developed between them. Yes, life had become worth- living all at once ... but now she was right back to where she was a few weeks ago, shielding herself from hurt, determinedly forcing herself to keep her thoughts from drifting along the pleasant lines whereby they would give her a picture of a future with Luke. Yes, she had known for a few days now that she could have forgotten the pain of the past unfortunate experiences and become all in all to Luke. And he was also coming to care--*Romaine was here!* Into her mind this stark fact was thrust and she actually felt a physical indrawing of herself—like a creature that encysts, Luke had said when describing her attitude, and this was how she felt at this moment. She wanted nothing so much as a shell around her, a shell that nothing could penetrate.

'I can't think why you decided to come all this way.' Melanie spoke at last and Robin looked at her. 'It was a waste of time and money.'

'I believed I could win you back.'

'With Romaine's assistance.' Melanie's voice was bitter.

'It was her idea, in fact. She had been to see your aunt, who told her about your staying here to look after a child. I don't think it was your aunt's idea for us to come--'

'I'm quite sure it wasn't. Did my aunt happen to mention that I was working for a particularly attractive and handsome man?—a wealthy man?'

'That's not like you, Melanie,' he protested. 'Are you suggesting that Romaine came here with the idea of stealing yet another man from you?'

'I should be a hypocrite if I denied that the idea has come to me. On the other hand, she couldn't steal Luke from me, simply because he and I are nothing more than employer and employee.' She wondered if she had gone pale; she felt as if the colour was fast leaving her face.

'Romaine's intention was solely to try to bring us together again. Much as I dislike her now I have to give her credit for genuinely regretting what she did to you.'

Melanie was shaking her head from side to side,

'I don't really believe this. I'd rather believe that Romaine wanted to have a holiday at someone else's expense. I expect you paid for this trip?' she added, looking questioningly at him.

He nodded.

'Of course I did. It would have been worth every penny had you come back to me.' He took a step towards her and extended his hands again. 'You can't have stopped loving me,' he asserted with a sudden frown. 'It was so strong and beautiful--'

'Strong?' she echoed, lifting her brows. 'Had it been strong I couldn't be standing here telling you that I no longer want anything to do with you.'

Robin bit Ijds lip, and turned from her to stare out over the lovely garden. Melanie followed the direction of his gaze, marvelling at her own detachment. In fact, she felt detached from everyone in the house except Deborah; she felt she would not care if she were to find herself quite alone with the child. Robin sighed a deep and prolonged sigh, but still she remained unaffected. The colour in the garden was of far more interest to her than the man standing there, his face drawn and his hands clenched at his sides. The sun was dropping swiftly behind the mountains and a spectral flare of crimson was already searing across the African sky. Closer to, beyond the blossom-festooned stoep and the low grenadilla hedge, the borders were bright with flowers—cannas and Watsonias, roses and allamandas, while towering above them the palms swayed gently against the sky, and now and then an elusive bird cry would create a mental picture of gay-plumaged wings being caught by the orange glow of sunset.

'I still think we could come together,' Robin was saying quietly. 'We should try, you know, Melanie, because you and I once had something very precious.'

She did not answer at once, for she was still gripped by the beauty before her. The day was going down in a crescendo of glory and the spectacle was too good to miss. The nearby trees were diminishing rapidly as were the foothills of the mountains, and the veld flowed out in a seemingly endless vista, wrapped in that elusive violet which was all a part of the theatrical splendour of twilight. In the garden itself dappled shades gave the impression of approaching magic and mystery.

'I have no inclination to try,' she told Robin at last. 'My decision is made and nothing can alter it now.'

He looked at her, noting her pallor and the faded expression in her eyes.

'You were so happy once,' he said regretfully. 'I've made you sad like this.'

'I'm not sad,' she was quick to deny. 'I've got over it and at this moment I feel nothing but indifference. It seems that we never loved at all.'

It was true, and yet she felt she ought by right to have experienced some sort of regret, however slight. For she did care deeply at one time and the future had held no fears for her happiness as Robin's wife.

'I've realized too late just how deeply I love you, Melanie.'

'You thought you loved Romaine,' she could not help reminding him. 'What happened that you and she came to discover that you weren't in love after all?'

'I don't know--' He shook his head. 'I really don't know, Melanie. It came all at once; we both felt it together and decided to talk about it. I knew then that it was you I loved, that it was always you.' He glanced pleadingly at her, but noting her expression he looked away quickly, his shoulders sagging. 'It really is the end, isn't it?' he said, and Melanie nodded her head without hesitation.

'It is, Robin.' And now she was able to inject a note of gentleness into her voice. 'You shouldn't have come.' A small pause and then, 'What will you do while waiting for Romaine? You could take a tour for a couple of days or so. They run them from Rayneburg.'

'Do you think I'm interested in things like that?' he returned bitterly. 'No, I expect I shall sit in my hotel room and spend my time reflecting on what might have been had not that sister of yours decided to flaunt

her charms in front of me! I expect she's busily .engaged in the same damned tactics with your handsome employer.' It was a statement and one which occupied Melanie's mind long after he had gone. And when Luke came inland smiled at her Melanie failed to respond, resolving not to allow herself to be affected in any way by his attractiveness or his approach.

He frowned and said,

'What's wrong, Melanie? You seem out of sorts, somehow.' He had come to her just as she was about to go to her room to bathe and change. How good-looking he was! And his eyes were soft and searching, concern in their depths. She remembered her first impression of him, admitting to the noble lines and impressive bearing, but branding him cold, austere, unfeeling.

'Robin's been here--'

'Robin? I wanted to be in when he arrived! When he didn't appear earlier I concluded that he wouldn't appear at all today. What had he to say?' The voice was harsh, the eyes like steel. Melanie looked up at him and knew a hurt inside at this change in him, even though the change was caused by Robin and was not the result of any displeasure that she herself might have incurred.

'He wanted me back.'

'Wanted?'

'I told him I was finished.'

'Good girl. I must admit that I wondered how his pleading would affect you.'

She managed a weak smile and said, 'You didn't imagine I'd take him back, surely?'

He paused a moment, his face wearing a preoccupied look.

'Women are such funny creatures,' he asserted at length. 'They appear to know, deep inside, that things will go wrong, yet they will make the attempt to put the clock back. I find this most frustrating, since it's something a mere male can't combat.' His face was still preoccupied and for some moments she studied his expression. Then she said, quite out of the blue and without knowing by what force she was impelled,

'Have you ever been in love, Luke?'

At this he came from his reverie and looked at her, his eyes faintly smiling.

'Tell me,' he said, 'what do you think?'

She coloured delicately and replied, 'It was an impertinent question, wasn't it?'

'Not in the least; it shows you're interested. Yes, as a matter of fact I was in love once. Does that surprise you?' he added with a touch of amusement that sent her heart out of control, for he was so profoundly attractive when in this faintly humorous mood.

'I'm not surprised,' was all she said in answer to his question, and of course he then wanted to know what had prompted her own question in the first place. 'I just wondered,' she said, hoping he would not, with his keen perception, suddenly guess that she had gained some information from Jancis.

'You're most restrained, aren't you, Melanie?' Luke was still smiling with his eyes and she glanced away.

'I don't know what you mean?'

'Aren't you curious to know what she was like?'

'The girl whom you loved?'

'That's right.'

'What was she like?' Melanie then asked obligingly, waiting to hear that the girl was similar in appearance to Romaine. But all he said was,

'She had a beauty that was, for me, at that time, quite irresistible.'

'What happened?' Melanie supposed that she should tactfully have relinquished the discussion before this question was voiced, but she was indeed curious to learn more about Luke's love affair. 'I mean, why did you part?'

'She, like you, was passing through the stage of recuperation after a broken engagement. She and I found much attract one another and as far as I was concerned our future together was settled, although at this time I hadn't proposed. She was not ready, in my opinion,' he added, and still again he was smiling with those tawny eyes of his. 'However, she received a letter from her former fiance who vowed he had always loved her and that his jilting her was a mistake. She went back to him as fast as the plane would take her,' he ended, and now his mouth was curved with humour.

'Were you broken-hearted?' she just had to ask, and at this he shook his head and then actually gave a short laugh.

'I believed I was at the time. I tore into her, maintaining that she couldn't put the clock back and that a man was not a man at all if he didn't know his own mind without this wavering.'

'I see why you talked about women trying to put the clock back,' said Melanie, and then she immediately went on to point out that she had

not made the slightest attempt to do so. 'I knew it would never work simply because I couldn't forget what he'd done to me.'

'You saw in time that it would never be a success.'

'That's right.'

'But in my case the girl believed it would be.'

'And was it?' inquired Melanie swiftly, even while knowing full well that it had not worked out after all.

'No; she wrote to me recently to tell me that she and her husband were separated.' He stopped and his eyes twinkled. 'She wanted to come and see me--'

'She did? Just like Robin ...?' Melanie tailed off, aware that she was really speaking her thoughts aloud.

'Just like Robin. I wrote back and informed her in no uncertain terms that I had no intention of marrying her now. She accepted this and—*unlike* Robin— did not waste time and money in coming over.' Glancing at his watch as he spoke, Luke said he must go and change. He asked about Romaine as he turned to leave the room and Melanie told him that she was resting on the stoep. What she did not mention was that despite the fact of her illness Romaine had contrived to appear just as glamorous and well-groomed as ever.

'Did Robin have a chat with her?' asked Luke, his fingers on the door handle.

'No; he went off without even saying one word to her.'

'He blamed her for everything, I expect?'

'He did.' Melanie wondered what Luke would say were she to repeat what Robin had said about Romaine's trying out her charms on Luke.

'I'm very glad that you sent him off,' was all Luke said before, swinging the door inwards, he passed through it, closing it quietly behind him.

All through dinner Romaine displayed her charms, and Luke was undoubtedly interested in the way she talked and smiled. Melanie knew once more that sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach and the dejection of spirit. Luke spoke to her several times, but she answered in monosyllables until in the end he confined his conversation to Romaine. This was formal, it was true, but gradually Romaine managed to dispel the coolness and even gained so much ground that she made Luke laugh on one or two occasions. His keen eyes seemed to examine intently every line and contour of Romaine's face; he looked at her eyes and her mouth and her lovely hair, all in a way that convinced Melanie that—inwardly at least—he was filled with admiration for her beautiful sister. As for Melanie's attitude towards her, it was aloof but not hostile, cold but not icily so. She had been genuinely worried at first as to the Reason for the pains suffered by Romaine and she was still faintly anxious, having noticed her once or twice putting a soothing hand to her stomach.

However, Romaine's adroitness with the male sex had remained unimpaired and when dinner was over and they all retired to the stoep Melanie was not long in saying her good nights and going to her bedroom. Once there she burst into tears, and for a full minute wept as if her heart would break. No use pretending that she did not know the cause of her tears. She was in love with Luke ... and she was about to see him fall madly in love with her sister. This she knew, without one atom of doubt, she told herself. They were together now, in the

romantic setting of flower-strewn verandah and luxuriant moonlight and stars which were an implacable part of the magic of Africa.

Why couldn't Robin have accepted the inevitable without coming out here with Romaine, intent on bringing about a reconciliation? And Romaine ...? Knowing her so well, Melanie could not give her credit for even the slightest measure of repentance or the desire to make amends by coming over to assist Robin in his efforts. No, it would be more logical to assume that it was Luke who had unwittingly drawn Romaine to Africa. Melanie dried her eyes at last and after bathing her face and hands got into bed. She would read, and forget all about those two down there, for after all there was really nothing she could do about preventing Luke from falling in love with Romaine; twice before she had without effort taken the man Melanie wanted, and she would do so again.

The following morning Melanie went riding with Deborah, and having wandered further afield than usual they came upon a little pool around which bloomed a veritable botanical garden. The walls on three sides of the pool were covered with lichens and mosses and dainty cushions of flowers formed in patterns which set off the colour contrasts to the most impressive advantage. Deborah was delighted, and after they had dismounted and tethered their horses they sat down on a rock and listened to the melodious sound of running water as it cascaded down one of the mossy walls and splashed into the pool.

'Isn't it beautiful?' exclaimed Deborah when the sunlight, escaping through the waving heads of the gum trees, sent ripples of silver over the surface of the pool. 'I must tell my daddy about this when I write to him tonight I'

'Tonight?' Melanie looked round and added, 'I thought you wrote to your daddy yesterday afternoon?'

'I did, but I lost the letter, so I'm going to write another after I'm in bed.'

'Uncle Luke thinks you go to sleep after I've put out the light.' Melanie was smiling; she knew full well that Deborah often became active after she, Melanie, had said good night and snapped off the light. 'If he happens to notice that you've put on the light again he's likely to be cross with you.' 'I know, but you won't tell him, will you?'

'Of course not. What else are you going to tell your daddy?'

'About Auntie Romaine--'

'Auntie Romaine? Who told you to call her that?'

'She did; she said she's going to stay with Uncle Luke for a long time, so I might as well call her Auntie Romaine. Isn't it a beautiful name? I wish I was called that, and I wish I was beautiful like her. Hasn't she got pretty hair?'

'Very pretty.' Melanie spoke briefly, her mind on what the child had said. 'I don't think she is staying with Uncle Luke for a long time. She's leaving just as soon as she feels better.' Romaine was feeling better already, completely better, but as the doctor said she must not be moved for three or four days she would of course be staying, but only for that time.... Only for that time if Luke decided she must go. But Melanie was so sure that he would ask her to stay on for a while longer. What would be the eventual outcome? Would the relationship reach the stage where Luke would ask Romaine to marry him? Melanie felt the tears pricking the backs of her eyes and resolutely shut out any picture of a marriage between Luke and her sister. Romaine had mentioned the divorce to Melanie, quite blatantly admitting that she had made a big mistake in marrying Giles in the first place.

'It'll be through in a couple of months,' she had said carelessly. 'We've arranged one of these "do-it-yourself" divorces and it takes only a few months.'

'You've been separated for two years, then?' This Melanie had not known, so little interest had she had in her sister's activities.

'Of course. I told Aunt Cissy, but she obviously hasn't passed on the information to you.'

'She wouldn't—not under the circumstances.'

'You're still mad at me for pinching your fiancé? All's fair in love and war, you know.' This conversation had taken place just after breakfast that morning, when Luke had left the homestead and Romaine was preparing to settle down on the stoep, where she would be waited on with drinks and other refreshments by Elizabeth. Melanie thought about it now as she watched Deborah chasing a butterfly. It was almost within her grasp when it escaped by fluttering away over the pool, and Deborah gave a little cry of disappointment.

'But if you had been able to catch it what would you have done with it?' Melanie asked, and Deborah said she would let it go again.

'I wouldn't like to keep it in a cage, or anything like that,' she added, her eyes wandering to where the bright little creature made dancing shadows along the edge of the pool.

'If you were to touch it, even, you would injure it, Deborah,' returned Melanie seriously. 'The wings of moths and butterflies are very fragile indeed.'

'Oh--Then I won't try to catch any more, because I would cry if I hurt one.'

Melanie smiled, aware of a longing within her and an errant thought that brought back Giles and the idea that, had she and he married, then it was most likely that she would by now have had a child of her own. Well, that was a dream she once had cherished, a dream that had died on the day that Robin had told her that their engagement was at an end. And yet--

Yes, there had been Luke, and a sweet elusive notion that with time he and she might get together. Nothing concrete, no word from him which might have given her a clue to his intentions, but somehow that lovely friendship had become to mean much more than it appeared on the surface and in fact Melanie had begun to admit that neither Giles nor Robin had ever affected her in the way Luke was doing. The pleasure of his presence, the quiet walks under the velvet sky when Luke would stop now and then to point out the various stars to her, the odd daytime stroll when, after a recent shower, the fields and pastures were brightened and the grass lush and green. So many memories in so short a time—and not one moment of dissension, no evidence of Luke's manner of cold austerity.

'I think,' she said to Deborah at last, 'we ought to be getting back.' Rising as she spoke, Melanie untethered the horses and began to stroke Sanaan's neck while waiting for Deborah to join her.

'When my daddy comes home can I still come sometimes and stay with Uncle Luke?' The child spoke as they moved away from the pool. 'I want to come to this lovely pond lots more times.'

'I expect you can stay with Uncle Luke, but of course I won't be here to bring you along to the pool.'

'You won't be here?' Deborah's wide forehead creased in a frown. 'I want you to live with Uncle Luke always.'

'That isn't possible, Deborah. I stayed only so that I could look after you while your father was away. As soon as he returns I shall be leaving.'

'Will you ever come back?'

'No, I don't think so.'

Deborah's frown deepened.

'I'll tell Uncle Luke I want you to stay,' she decided, her firm little chin tilting up. 'He loves me and so he'll let you stay for ever!'

For ever--Yes, she could spend the rest of her life here, in this beautiful country with its sun and warmth and mountains and forests. The homestead was like a dream house with a fairy-tale setting ... and then there was Luke--

She made no answer to what Deborah had said and for the next twenty minutes or so neither spoke very much at all. Only on their arrival back did Deborah begin to chatter, this to Luke who was standing on the stoep talking to Romaine who, dazzlingly beautiful and immaculately dressed, made Melanie feel like a tramp, and she became acutely—even painfully—conscious of her dusty slacks and sweat-stained shirt. Her hair too was far from tidy and when she saw Luke's eyes move from Romaine's lovely face and figure to that of Melanie herself, she blushed hotly and, turning away, excused herself and left the two adults and the child on the stoep.

But in her room she heard Deborah's voice carried clearly, as she spoke first to Luke and, later, to Romaine.

The child was saying that she wanted Melanie to stay for always, and that Uncle Luke must make her. Luke said something to this, but his voice was so low that Melanie missed the words completely. But she heard drifts of what Romaine was saying and she gathered that her

sister was making it very clear to Luke that it was impossible for Melanie to remain in Africa. There was Aunt Cissy, who depended on her, and in any case, Melanie would never be happy and settled in any country other than her own.

Listening, Melanie felt only bitterness at these untruths—or perhaps she ought to be more generous and term them assumptions. Romaine had no idea whether or not Melanie could be happy and settled in any country other than her own; also, Aunt Cissy had never depended on anyone; she liked to see Melanie, but she had never once intimated that she *needed* her. However, it did not matter what Romaine said, for Melanie had no intention of trying to prolong her stay in Luke's house.

After washing and changing she would very much have liked to escape somewhere on her own, but as Deborah had finished chattering she was told to go to Melanie and be bathed and made to look pretty.

'And then we'll go off to Rayneburg,' added Luke with a glance at Melanie. 'I've a little shopping to do.'

'Oh, dear,' sighed Romaine, leaning back and crossing her shapely legs one over the other. 'Am I to be left all on my own?' 'Perhaps,' suggested Luke, 'you'd like to go to your room and lie down?' He sounded anxious, to Melanie's ears. It never occurred to her that he might be carelessly indifferent as to how Romaine should spend her time.

'Yes, I might do that,' languidly from Romaine, whose lovely eyes were resting on Luke's face. 'Then I shall feel brighter when your friends come this evening for a sundowner.'

'Friends--?' Melanie glanced at Luke. 'You have friends coming in this evening?' She felt hurt that he had not mentioned this to her but yet had done so to Romaine. 'Who are they?'

'Charles and Jancis, and one or two others. You've met them all at the Club.' He was subjecting her to a searching scrutiny and she did wonder if he noticed the dark rings under her eyes which, a few minutes previously, she had endeavoured to camouflage by the application of a little face powder. Her eyes, she knew, still wore that dull expression and altogether she felt glaringly inferior to her beautiful sister. That Luke must be aware of this played so deeply on her mind that she retreated into a sort of defensive silence which was maintained throughout the drive into Rayneburg and when the car was parked Luke turned to her and said, his eyes narrowed and faintly cold,

'What's wrong with you, Melanie? Why the protective armour again? I believed I'd broken through it, but now you're right back to where you were at the beginning.'

'I'm all right.' Unconsciously she injected a note of aggression into her voice. 'I don't know why you should trouble yourself about me and my—my moods.'

'Moods is certainly right.' He looked away for a second to where Deborah was standing, staring at a dog that was sitting in the back of one of the parked cars. 'Snap out of it,' he said, and this was almost an order, spoken with an authoritative inflection in his voice. 'Romaine won't be here much longer, if that is what's upsetting you.'

'She won't?'

'No, she won't.' Frowning at her, Luke added, 'Why do you ask that?'

'Deborah seemed to think that she was staying for some time.'

His eyes opened wide.

'It's the first I've heard of it. As far as I'm concerned she leaves immediately the doctor declares her to be fit to be moved.'

'You don't believe she's fit to be moved now?'

'I do, but I can't very well order her out, can I?' He sounded impatient and his mouth had hardened. Undoubtedly he was not feeling in the best of moods himself. 'The doctor will call tomorrow and—I hope—will say that Romaine can leave for the hotel in Rayneburg.'

Melanie said nothing; she was mentally listless, so convinced that Romaine had already progressed more than half-way towards her object of drawing Luke's interest to herself. Luke sighed impatiently at her silence and, calling Deborah to him, took her hand and began to stride away towards the street in which the shops and the bank were situated.

'Shall I take Deborah?' asked Melanie as they came from the car park into the tree-lined road. 'You'll be better able to do your shopping then.'

'Have you anything to buy?'

'One or two items, yes.'

'Very well.' He arranged to meet them at the hotel, where, he said, they would have afternoon tea. His tones were curt, his whole manner aloof. Melanie told herself that he had not adopted such an attitude with her sister. No, with Romaine he would be all softness and concern, just as he was when asking if she would like to rest in her room during the afternoon.

'Can we go to the toy shop?' Deborah wanted to know when Luke had left them. 'I want to buy some chairs for my dolls' house.'

This was a pleasurable task and Melanie entered into it with enthusiasm. There were several types of chairs from which to choose and both she and Deborah took some time to make up their minds. In the end both agreed that the upholstered ones were the best, but when it came to paying Melanie found to her discomfort that she had not enough money; she had left her purse at home and all she had with her was a small sum which had been dropped into the centre pocket of her handbag.

'We'll come back,' she was saying, when she became aware of Robin standing at the end of the counter, his face turned towards her, his ears alert. 'The little girl's uncle will pay--'

'Allow me to pay!' Robin took a few steps to reduce the distance between them. 'I have a note here. Is it sufficient?'

Melanie was shaking her head, but the assistant had already taken the note.

'I prefer to wait,' she snapped. 'Luke will pay.'

'Melanie, please let me pay. It's for the child, not for you.'

She turned from him and said, 'I want nothing to do with you, Robin. I shall be obliged if you'd go away.'

He remained at her side.

'I love you,' he said simply, and there was no mistaking the catch in his voice. 'For God's sake, give me another chance! I've been through purgatory these past couple of days.'

She turned then, and flooding over her was the memory of the happy days they had spent together. She recalled those week-ends when she had become so welcome a guest at his parents' home. Having no home or parents of her own she had been ever grateful for the security

which those week-ends had provided. She had had an anchor at that time; now she had nothing and she floundered, lonely and dejected. Robin seemed suddenly to be a straw to which she could cling ... a straw that could perhaps lead her to the anchor for which she craved.

'It could never be quite the same,' she murmured, not meaning him to hear this uttering of her thoughts. 'One can never completely mend a break such as that--'

'I love you,' he repeated, and although this time there was a distinct note of eagerness and hope in his words he was careful to hold back any trace of confidence that might otherwise have crept into his voice. 'That, surely, is the important thing.'

She looked into his eyes and said with a deep and trembling sigh,

'I don't love you, Robin—not any more.'

He swallowed hard.

'You did once and you can again,' he stated. 'I'd take the chance on it, Melanie.'

'I can never love you—not now.' Her thoughts flew to Luke and she knew that he and he only could have won her heart completely.

'The lady's giving you your change.' Deborah, tugging at his trouser leg, brought Robin's attention from Melanie and he held out his hand for the money the assistant was offering him. He thanked her, speaking well above the whisper he had been using when speaking to Melanie. 'Shall we go now?' asked Deborah, her small parcel clutched in her hand. 'I'm ready for my tea.'

'It's too early yet.' Melanie smiled down at her and took hold of her hand. 'We'll go and do my shopping and then it might be time to meet Uncle Luke.'

'May I come along with you?' Robin's voice pleaded and, unable to infuse him, Melanie said yes, he could come along with them.

'This evening,' he was saying about an hour later when, the shopping finished, they were on their way to the hotel. 'Will you let me take you to the Club? There's a dance on, and you do remember how we used to enjoy dancing together.' He stopped rather abruptly as he noticed the sudden stiffening of Melanie's features. 'That wasn't tactful, was it? I'm sorry, dear, if I brought back memories that hurt.'

That, she thought, was even less tactful, but she made allowances for his present emotional condition. He was unsure as to whether or not she would in the end be persuaded to take him back, to promise that she would try to recapture the happiness that had been theirs before Romaine had decided that she wanted Robin, as she had previously wanted Giles.

'I don't think I want to go to the dance this evening,' she said after a long moment of indecision. 'I feel I ought not to make any arrangements without consulting Luke.'

'Luke? But surely he doesn't control your evenings —your leisure time?'

'No, of course not--' She trailed off, reflecting that of late the evenings had been spent with Luke, pleasant hours of quiet companionship which had on one or two occasions lasted into the morning hours; it had been as if neither she nor Luke had wanted to bring the pleasure to an end by saying good night. 'But we've never really fixed my hours, or my time off.'

'I don't see any difficulty. When Deborah's in bed there isn't anything to keep you, is there?'

She shook her head, but thought of leaving Romaine alone with Luke. Not that it would be the first time the two had been alone together.

But Melanie was remembering that all unconsciously she had left Giles alone with Romaine-- However, if Luke was to fall victim to her sister's charms, there was nothing Melanie could do to prevent it. It was as though, where Romaine entered into it, Melanie must admit defeat at the outset. She was no match for Romaine simply because she lacked the essential weapon, which was beauty. True, Luke had said she possessed a certain beauty, but Melanie suspected that he was just being kind because she herself had declared that she was merely passable.

'I suppose I could come out with you?' She had uttered the words before asking herself from where they were coming. She had no real desire to go dancing with Robin, on the contrary she would prefer that she could retire to her room and be alone. But for some reason she could not understand words came to her lips unbidden and she found herself uttering them.

'You'll come?' Eager now, Robin risked touching her hand. 'Dear Melanie, I'm so much happier than I was an hour or so ago. Shall I call for you about seven?'

'That's far too early. Deborah doesn't go to bed until that time. I usually read to her for about half an hour, and then I shall have to get ready--'

'Eight o'clock, then?'

'Yes, eight or just after.'

Deborah was running on ahead, but now she turned and ran back.

'I'm very hungry! Please let's get there quickly!'

'We're still a little early,' Melanie told her, glancing at her watch. 'Uncle Luke said four o'clock and it's still only a quarter to.'

'Well, we can wait for him. Besides, he might be there early and he won't like waiting for us.'

'Very well.' Melanie turned to Robin. 'Goodbye. I'll see you later.'

'Fine.' He paused and then, 'You'll not change your mind?' he questioned anxiously, and Melanie shook her head.

'No,' she answered firmly, 'I'll not change my mind.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

LUKE was already in the hotel lounge when they entered, and Deborah immediately informed him of all that had happened.

'And then the gentleman went off on his own, but he was nice to pay for my chairs, wasn't he?'

'Very nice.' Curt the words and cold the glance he sent in Melanie's direction. 'I would have paid, you knew that.'

'I told Robin you would pay, but he insisted. The woman behind the counter took the money from him so there was little I could do.'

'Nonsense I You should have refused to take the money!'

'I didn't take it,' she protested, loath to say anything that would lead to a deterioration of the position between them.

'You allowed him to pay!' He seemed disproportionately angry about Robin's payment of the money and Melanie once again endeavoured to smooth the matter over.

'I couldn't cause a scene in the shop, could I?'

'Don't you like that gentleman to pay for my chairs?' interrupted Deborah. 'You see, Uncle Luke, Melanie had left her purse at home, so she hadn't enough money, and it was lucky that her friend came along because he had plenty of money.'

'You said you weren't having anything more to do with the man,' snapped Luke, ignoring what Deborah had said. 'There should have been no difficulty about your refusing to allow him to pay.'

Melanie fell silent, wondering how she was to inform Luke that she had consented to go to the Club with Robin that evening.

'Shall we go in to tea?' she asked, going on to say that Deborah was hungry.

•They'll bring jt to us in here.' Luke beckoned and a waitress appeared. 'We'd like afternoon tea brought to us here,' he said. The girl, dusky-skinned but speaking excellent English, produced a notebook and took the order. When she had gone Melanie sat back in her chair and watched as Deborah took out the chairs from the parcel she had already opened.

'Do you like them?' she asked, lifting her small face to his. 'Melanie helped me to choose them. There were a lot more, but we liked these best.'

Luke took one of the chairs and appeared to be examining it as to the quality of workmanship, but Melanie sensed his lack of interest, aware that his mind was on Robin and his intrusion into her life again after she had said, quite firmly and finally, that she wanted nothing more to do with him. She decided to tell him that she was going out that evening, but it took several attempts before the words could be forced out. And when at last they were, they contained an element of defiance and challenge, since it had nothing to do with Luke anyway, and so he had no right either to approve or disapprove of her decision.

'You've accepted an invitation to go out with him!' Luke stared unbelievably at her across the table. 'I don't think I've heard aright?'

She coloured, angry with him, but even more angry with herself for allowing him to affect her like this. He might almost be in a position of total authority over her, 'she thought.

'It'll be a change,' she muttered defensively.

'From what?' His narrowed gaze held hers and she knew full well what he meant.

'Romaine's here,' she began, when he interrupted her with,

'Answer my question--?'

'Uncle Luke,' protested Deborah, her eyes suddenly filling up, 'I don't like you being angry with Melanie, and shouting at her like that. She hasn't done anything wrong—have you, Melanie?'

'Deborah, be quiet. Your tea will be here in a few moments; I want you to eat it without talking, understand?'

Deborah pouted, but the stern inflection in Luke's voice was noted and the child's voice was meek when she spoke.

'All right, Uncle Luke, I won't talk while I'm eating.'

Luke returned his attention to Melanie. His eyes were narrowed, his mouth tight.

'Perhaps,' he said stiffly, 'you'll now tell me what you meant about its being a change?'

'I didn't mean it would be a change from—from those evenings which—which you and I spent together--'

'You're not being at all clear,' he cut in coldly. 'It seems to me that you prefer this fellow's company to mine?'

'That's not true,' she denied indignantly. 'But Romaine is here, and therefore you are occupied with her.'

'I... ?' Luke's eyes opened very wide indeed. Melanie saw the astounded expression contained in them. 'Why the devil should you infer a thing like that?'

Melanie shrugged her shoulders in what was meant to be a careless gesture.

'I expect you and she have a lot in common.'

'Indeed?' His eyes were now notably alert, and his head moved almost imperceptibly as if he were mentally reaching a conclusion. 'Perhaps you will explain just what your sister and I could possibly have in common?'

Melanie swallowed, her colour deepening under Luke's interrogating stare.

'She's very beautiful. Men can't resist her.' This was not the right thing to say, but Melanie saw no reason to withhold from him what he already knew. 'I expect you enjoy her company,' she ended, and once again his head moved slightly.

'I think I understand.' Curt the tones, but yet his eyes had lost some of their hardness. 'Melanie, if I don't end by beating you it will be a miracle--' He stopped abruptly as Deborah, glancing up swiftly on hearing this, opened her mouth to utter a big 'Ooh' of astonishment and censure. 'Here's your tea,' he told the child. 'Start on the sandwiches, not the cakes!'

Deborah blinked at him, her eyes filling up again. Melanie looked angrily at him and fully expected that he would say something soothing to the child. But he was staring at a spot behind her and when automatically she turned her head she saw Robin sitting at a table in the corner, a good distance from the table which they themselves were occupying.

'Robin is staying here,' she began, but Luke instantly interrupted to say that he was well aware of that fact.

'Seeing that I sent him here I ought to know!' he added scathingly. 'What would you like me to do now—invite him over so that we can make a nice friendly party for tea?'

'There's no need for sarcasm, Luke.'

'Are you really intending to go out with him this evening?'

'Of course; I promised.'

'Then there's nothing more for me to say!' Picking up a sandwich, he began to eat it, but the very idea of food sickened Melanie and all she had was a cup of tea. This scene had hurt unbearably and she did wonder in her confused mind just why she had agreed to go out with Robin when she had no real desire to do so. She expected it was a sort of defensive tactic instigated by her conviction that Romaine must inevitably captivate Luke. Yes, that was it! She wanted more than anything to conceal both from Luke and Romaine that she had any feeling for him at all. In this way she would be saved embarrassment, and Romaine would never know that, for the third time, she had been able to come right in and, without the least effort, rob her sister, leaving her with nothing but emptiness and humiliation.

No word was spoken between Melanie and Luke on the journey home and when at last they arrived at the house Melanie took Deborah off to the room which Luke had set aside as a playroom. There she and Deborah sorted out the furniture in the dolls' house and added the new chairs. Despite her dejection Melanie could not help but find pleasure in this task, and later, when she was ready to go out, she was quite surprised to find, on glancing in the mirror, that the dark shadows were no longer to be seen and that her eyes were a little brighter than they had been of late.

Romaine was in the sitting-room and she glanced up as Melanie entered wearing a long dress of dark blue brushed nylon with a high

waist and frilled bodice trimmed lavishly with white lace. The neck was high, the sleeves full at the top but tight-fitting from just above the elbow down to the wrist.

'Going out!' queried Romaine. 'You never mentioned it at dinner.'

'I'm going to the Club.' Moving into the middle of the room, Melanie stood there, looking down at her sister, reclining there on the couch, like a beautiful model of perfection, right from the crown of her golden head to her shapely ankles and tiny feet.

'The Club.' Romaine frowned slightly. 'I must go there at the first opportunity.'

'You'll be returning to England once you're fully recovered, surely?'

'Not on your life!' Romaine gave a spurt of laughter before adding, 'I want to taste the sort of existence one has in this part of the world. Luke's my ideal man and I want to know what sort of social life I shall live if I decide to marry him.'

'If *you* decide?' Although Melanie's voice was calm and steady her nerves were rioting and her heartbeats were far from normal. Romaine married to Luke--

'Aren't you taking a lot for granted? You've known him less than three days.'

'What has time to do with it? I have Luke in the palm of my hand already, so I'm not contemplating any difficulty in bringing him to the point of a marriage proposal.' Again the laugh; it grated on Melanie's senses and she glanced through the window into the darkness, wishing she could see the lights of Robin's car appearing along the tree-lined drive. 'I never have difficulty with any man, do I?'

Melanie looked at her with contempt.

'It would be to your credit if you sought around for your own man instead of indulging in the hobby of stealing mine.'

'So you've fallen in love with Luke?'

'Certainly not!'

'But you've just admitted it, my dear sister,' purred Romaine. 'However, it's of no matter since you can't have him now that I'm here. No, don't interrupt, Melanie! I *know* that you've fallen for him simply because no woman could possibly live in the same house as Luke and remain immune to his devastating charm. Why, all the women in the district must have had a go at winning him, for he's certainly a prize and no mistake!'

'How crude you are!'

'And how slow *you* are! If I'd been with Luke for only half the time you've been with him I'd have been married to him by now.'

Melanie sent another glance towards the window. What had happened to Robin? He was already five minutes late.

'You take a lot for granted, Romaine. Luke isn't like the others, you'll find.' That the wish was father to the thought Melanie would not have denied, and she was not surprised when Romaine said,

'You're hoping that I'll fail? No chance, Melanie. I can have any man I want—*any man*!' There was no comment from Melanie and she went on to say that already Luke was profoundly interested in her as a woman. 'He's falling fast,' continued Romaine with a sort of exultant confidence. 'I can guarantee to be able to twist him right around my finger within a week.'

Melanie said, her face white as the trimming on her dress,

'You're not expected to be here for a week.'

'I shall make sure that I'm here for much longer than that.' A small pause and then, 'My, but how pale you are! Foolish girl, to fall in love so often! Especially when you know very well that I can take your man every time. Believe me, Luke is mine already, so you might as well forget all about him. I was interested when Aunt Cissy told me about this wealthy South African farmer with whom you were staying. I didn't at all like the idea that you might marry wealth when I myself have not managed to do so yet. Aunt Cissy could have bitten out her tongue; I saw that at once, but the damage was done. Did you know that she was half hoping that you and Luke would get together?'

Melanie turned away, her whole mind and body affected by her sister's heartlessness and total disregard for her discomfiture and distress.

'I think I'll wait on the stoep for Robin--'

'Robin? You're going out with Robin, after saying you didn't intend taking him back?'

'I still don't intend taking him back.'

'He'll be hoping—if you start going out with him again.'

'It's only for tonight.' Melanie made a move towards the french window. 'He's only staying around because he thinks you'll be returning to England with him.'

'Then he's in for a disappointment. You might tell him, if you don't mind, that I'm not intending to return for some considerable time, so he can go just whenever it suits him to do so.' Casual the tone; it seemed impossible that Romaine had ever been so attracted to Robin that she could have taken him from her own sister.

'I still believe you're taking too much for granted. Luke hasn't asked you to stay, has he?'

Romaine laughed and sat back even more comfortably against the cushions. There was no doubt, thought Melanie, that she made a most alluring picture, and it would not be in the least surprising if, as Romaine had said, Luke was already falling in love with her. In fact, it would be surprising if he had not been falling in love with her.

'You're trying to convince yourself that he isn't interested, aren't you?' sneered Romaine. 'Yet deep down inside you you know very well that I'm well on the way to success. Silly child! Aren't you sorry that you allowed yourself to fall for him?'

'I didn't fall for him!' flared Melanie, quite unable to endure any more of this kind of talk. 'He isn't my type at all!'

'No?' Romaine's voice changed with startling speed. 'Luke isn't your type, Melanie?' The voice was now soft and attractively husky. 'But how strange. Who, then, is your type—Robin, with whom you're going out this evening?'

Melanie scarcely knew what she was saying as she replied, a tremor of passion in her voice,

'Yes, of course Robin's my type! It should be obvious that he is!'

'And not Luke?'

'I've already said so! Luke's the last man I'd be likely to fall for!' That should sound convincing, decided Melanie, congratulating herself. And she turned then, intending to make her exit through the window—but she almost collided with Luke. He had been standing there for the past few seconds; she was never so sure of anything in her life.

And Romaine had known he was there.

'Your boy-friend's waiting,' was his icy comment as his hard eyes ran over her figure. 'He came round the wrong way and he's at the back. I've told him to come round to the front,' and with that he strode past Melanie and went through the room into some other part of the house.

'You're very clever, Romaine, I'll grant you that,' said Melanie bitterly. 'How could you be so vile as to make me say things I didn't mean?'

'So you do love him? Oh, well, he wouldn't have looked at you anyway, and most certainly not now, when he can have me.'

'One day,' predicted Melanie, looking straight at her, 'you'll be sorry for what you've done to me.'

Romaine merely grinned and said carelessly,

'I doubt it. I'm not the sort to have qualms of conscience; it's far too uncomfortable. Life is for living, Melanie,' she abided, her eyes glinting with a sort of defiance which Melanie had never seen before. 'I intend to live, and to enjoy every single moment of my life.' She glanced at the closed door and for a second or two she seemed to become thoughtful. 'Luke will be exciting, and I don't believe I shall ever tire of him. If I do his money will compensate and I shall have a good time on that--' She stopped, for Melanie had turned away and was leaving the room by the french window.

'Ah, there you are!' Robin's eager voice jarred on Melanie's nerves and she would have done anything to be able to make some excuse and send him away. But she could not, since he would be utterly hurt and miserable. So she went to the Club, and danced and smiled, and when the evening came to an end she knew that Robin was more than a little optimistic about a reconciliation.

On the way back to Luke's home she mentioned this, and Robin admitted that he hoped for total forgiveness on her part.

'Oh, I can forgive you,' she readily answered, 'but I can never care as I cared before.'

'If you take this attitude you won't,' was his rather gentle rejoinder. He was cautiously handling the car as he drove it along a road where tall palm trees swayed in the night breeze and where here and there lights could be seen twinkling from the windows of the smart bungalows which were built on the low rises and in the valley.

'I don't think I ever cared as strongly as I should have done, Robin,' she told him seriously, and he turned swiftly, a frown on his forehead.

'What exactly do you mean by that?' he wanted to know.

'I've got over it so quickly.'

'More quickly than you got over Giles.' A statement, and it brought to mind Luke's comment that, in the case of Giles, she had had no help.

'I've had things to take my mind off it this time.'

'Such as?' A faint trace of stiffness had crept into his tone.

'I came here, for one thing. It was all new and interesting.'

'And there was Luke Shadwell.'

She swallowed and remained silent for a space.

'Yes,' she agreed at length, 'there was Luke Shadwell.'

'I see--' The stiffness remained in his voice, but now it was accompanied by a hint of despair. 'You're in love with him?'

'No—oh, no! Of course not--'

'But you've just admitted it—almost.'

She supposed that this was true, but she now wished only to refute the idea she had given him.

'I meant that he offered me employment, looking after Deborah.'

'Your aunt told this to Romaine. But that's not the whole situation, is it? You've come to care for Luke?'

'Luke isn't interested in me,' she told him quietly, but with a quick perception for which she would not have given him credit he said,

'Not since Romaine came here, eh?'

She supposed she was going pale, as she usually did when her nerves were being tested like this.

'Shall we change the subject?' she asked. 'I have no wish to discuss either Luke or Romaine.'

He was silent for a space and then, almost harshly,

'She'll set out to get him, that's for sure! And when that woman spreads her tentacles there's no escape. I know, and so does Giles! He, poor devil, has to make a new future for himself, having lost four years of his life—no, wasted four years! I suppose, considering this, I myself should be thanking my stars that she threw me over before a marriage could take place!' He was bitter and furiously angry, but he certainly was not experiencing any real hurt by what Romaine had done to him. 'She'll go on and on ruining men's lives! A woman like that ought to be put away!'

'She'll settle down eventually, I expect.'

'Never! If she manages to get Luke Shadwell it'll be his money that'll keep her with him—I'd wager my last penny on that!'

He drove with rather less care and on taking a bend the car skidded.

'Be careful,' she warned, 'these roads are treacherous in the dark.'

He steadied the car, but his temper was such that it was some time before he began to drive with any real care.

'So my cause is definitely lost,' he said at last. 'You could never forget Luke, not after once having cared for him.'

She said nothing, hoping he would allow the subject to drop, but her hope was in vain.

'Robin,' she pleaded after he had been muttering about his lost chances for a while, 'please forget the whole thing. I don't wish to talk about it—I've already told you this.'

'Has any man been a greater fool than I?' he said, ignoring her plea. 'How could I have come to lose a girl like you?'

Melanie decided that silence on her part was the only effective way in which she could put a stop to Robin's comments, so she sat back and, folding her hands in her lap, tried to relax, to steal a little of the peace that surrounded her in the darkness that enveloped the veld.

And Robin too fell silent, speaking only when they pulled up before the front door of the homestead. Lights were on and through the window Melanie could see Luke and Romaine sitting there, each with a glass in hand. So the guests had already left.

'There she is,' was Robin's angry and disgusted comment. 'Playing her usual game—the game she must inevitably win! Why are men such

damned idiots!' He snapped off the headlights and turned to Melanie. 'So this is goodbye—really goodbye?'

Suddenly she was filled with pity for him; it overrode all other considerations and emotions. His dejected voice smote her, his very manner, with shoulders sagging and mouth drooping, went straight to her compassionate heart. She had no other desire at this moment than to comfort him and impulsively she said,

'While you're here, Robin, I'm quite willing to go out with you, if you want me to, that is?'

'If I want you to! Melanie, you're an angel! Yes, dear, we'll go out together while I'm here.'

'Do you know just how long you're staying?'

'I haven't made up my mind. It hasn't anything to do with that bitch of a sister of yours; she can make her own way back—if she's intending going back, that is! I was staying only in the hope that you would come to me, that we could get together again.'

'I thought you were waiting for Romaine.'

'Perhaps I was at first, but now that I see she's trying on her tactics with your handsome Luke Shadwell I'm not interested in seeing her safely home.'

'You should never have come, Robin,' she said gravely. 'It must have cost you a lot of money?'

'What does money matter? It would have been worth a thousand times more had I been successful in my mission.'

That, she supposed, was gratifying, but yet it made no impression on her; she was immune to the fact of his loving her—immune that was as regards any reciprocation on her part.

'I'll say good night.' Melanie managed a weak smile as she turned her head towards him. 'Thank you for taking me.'

'Can I see you tomorrow evening?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Same time?'

She nodded her head.

'Where shall we go?'

'I'll take you out to dinner.'

'Then I'll put on a long dress.'

He smiled at her in the dimness of the car.

'You always look so lovely in an evening dress, Melanie.'

'Passable,' she said briefly, her eyes wandering to the window and to the beautiful girl sitting there, opposite to Luke, and with the light just in the correct place to enhance the clear unblemished skin of her face. Romaine had once said to Melanie,

'Your trouble is that you haven't either technique or finesse in your dealings with men. Whatever the occasion you should position yourself so that every advantage is derived from the light and shade of the room, or other place in which you find yourself. Quite often you look positively plain, and all because you haven't taken the

trouble to ensure that you're positioned correctly in relation to the light.'

'Not passable,' declared Robin with a hint of anger. 'You always used to say that.'

She shrugged and, opening the door, slid from the car.

'Good night, Robin,' she said, and scarcely waited for his answer as she moved away from the car.

It turned, and disappeared along the drive; Melanie went up the steps of the stoep and stood by the rail, staring out over the gardens to the veld beyond. The loneliness was intense, breathless; the shapes of the kopjes and baobab trees became mysterious in the implacable moonlight. A few pinpoints of silver filtered the moving foliage of palm and bamboo—lights from the native huts which lay beyond Luke's one cropped area of lucerne and soya beans.

She turned, nerves tingling, to find Luke standing in the frame of the open window. Even in shadow his face showed up harshly and his mouth was tight, matching the taut line of that strong inflexible jaw.

'I hope you enjoyed your evening.' He spoke with icy politeness and she remembered with poignant regret that he had heard from her lips words that had not been true—words spoken in self-defence, and put into her mouth by her sister who knew that Luke was close enough to overhear.

'Yes—it was most enjoyable, thank you, Luke.' She looked at him, desperately wanting to undo the damage that had been done earlier, damage to his pride, mainly, for it could not have been pleasant for him to hear that he was not the type that appealed to her.

'I'm delighted that you're so happy.' Sarcasm, surely, since she was certain that she was looking far from happy. Luke's eyes flickered

over her and she felt stripped. In consequence colour flooded her cheeks and all she desired was to escape. But this was not possible, with Luke standing in the window like that. She realized suddenly that she was in the full glow of the light from the room behind; it was not a position in which Romaine would have found herself—no, not in a harsh light such as this. Instinctively Melanie would have turned from him, but he was speaking again and, she was forced to look into his face. 'Have you made another date with him?'

She nodded, but then kept her head averted.

'Yes, as a matter of fact, I have.'

It seemed an eternity before he spoke.

'I conclude that you've decided to take him back?' Strange the inflection in his tone; it mingled with the harsh undertone and she wished she could have grasped its meaning.

'No, not at all,' she replied softly, her eyes straying once more to the girl in the room behind. Romaine was becoming restless; it was clear that she was feeling herself neglected—and she would be hating it. 'I promised to go out with him while he's here,' added Melanie, and heard an exclamation escape him. As before she wished she could be given some insight into what went on within his mind.

'And how long is he staying here?'

'I don't know.'

'Until you're in a position to go back with him,' rejoined Luke in harsh and frigid accents. 'I hope you'll honour your promise to stay until Deborah's father returns?'

'Certainly I shall! And as for returning with Robin, I've no intention of--'

'Of picking up the threads?' he cut in almost savagely. 'But he's your type—I overheard you say so to your sister.' He waited, and she saw a nerve move in the side of his neck. 'Well, have you nothing to say to this?'

Automatically she shook her head, asking herself just what she could say. Luke had heard, and that was that. A denial would be useless under these circumstances. Luke would not believe her, and he could not be blamed for any scepticism he might display. 'No, Luke, I've nothing to say.' He raked her face contemptuously. 'You'll go back to him,' he asserted harshly. 'Before you know where you are you'll be wearing his ring again!'

She said, scarcely knowing why, 'I suppose it would provide me with an anchor.' 'Undoubtedly! And as that appears to be all you require from marriage then it should, after all, work out very well.'

'Security's important.' Again she knew not why she spoke like this. She supposed that it was because she was indifferent about the conversation, desiring only to bring it to an end.

'All-important, obviously. Well, Melanie, I wish you luck!'

So sharp and angry was his tone that she thought he would have turned from her and re-entered the room where Romaine was waiting for him. But he stood motionless, staring past her at the scene on which she herself had been looking a short while previously. Clouds shifting across the moon created patterns on the ground and on the low hills, so that they became covered with a patchwork quilt of contrasting light and shade. Along the dry stream bed palms and bamboos moved gently, blanking out the lights from the huts now and then. The silence was profound, unearthly.

'I think I'll turn in—it's getting late.' Melanie was all awkwardness, just as she had been in the very beginning.

'You're right; it is late.' Still he did not move; he seemed wholly unaware of the girl sitting in the room, but he also seemed unaware of Melanie herself as he said, so softly that she had to strain hard to catch the words,

.. willing to accept second best ... simply for security.'

'What do you mean by that?' she wanted to know and, as he jerked visibly, she knew that he had in fact been murmuring his thoughts aloud.

'By second best?' He gave a shrug and added without much interest, 'Second best's sufficient for your present needs, so you'll marry Robin—who after all is your particular type,' he added, and she did wonder if she detected a hint of bitterness to his voice. Something about him made her think of his own unproductive love affair; he had got over it without too much trouble, she decided. But then strong emotional feelings were seldom found in men; they very soon allowed other things to become superimposed on any hurts they might happen to sustain. How easy it was for them! Melanie almost wished she herself were a man.

'I'm going in,' she said again, and this time Luke moved to one side, making room for her to pass him. 'Good night, Luke.' A moth flew close to her before settling on a small branch of the bougainvillaea vine curling its way around one of the tough wooden pillars of the stoep. The little creature's eyes burned like rubies, and they seemed to be looking right at her. Automatically she moved a finger close to the bough and" the moth flew off again. Luke watched intently, but Melanie never glanced at him again as she went past him and into the room. She heard his good night, glanced at the petulant face of her sister, then passed through the room to the corridor outside.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ROMAINE had somehow managed to convince the doctor that she was still unfit to be moved. To Melanie the whole situation was ridiculous simply because it was plain to her that her sister was totally recovered, and had been so after the first couple of days. But she groaned when the doctor touched her stomach, and shuddered as he drew away. His brow was furrowed and it did seem that he would advise hospital treatment. Watching Romaine intently, Melanie saw that she had grasped the doctor's anxiety and in order to forestall any suggestion that she should go to the hospital, Romaine said silkily, fluttering her beautiful lashes so that the poor man was brought instantly under her spell,

'I've had this before, doctor, and it does last for a week or ten days, usually. It'll go, believe me. There's no need for any real anxiety. It's just that I always have to rest—but not in bed, of course,' she was quick to add, and Melanie could not help but allow her lips to curve in a gesture of contempt. Romaine had no intention of staying in bed, not while she could spend her time more profitably in ensnaring Luke.

'Very well,' said the doctor at last. 'I'll come in again in a couple of days, and I hope by then that you're feeling much better.' He turned to Melanie, a frown on his brow. 'If the pain recurs you must get in touch with me at once.'

'I'm quite sure it won't recur,' she could not help saying. 'My sister will be quite well by the time you call again.'

His frown deepened. He said censoriously,

'You don't appear to be sufficiently concerned about your sister, if you don't mind my saying so, young lady!'

Melanie coloured a little while Romaine, reclining against the silken cushions on the settee, grinned behind the doctor's back.

'Take no notice of Melanie,' she purred as the doctor turned towards her. 'She's never really understood me, and in addition she's rather hard—no compassion, doctor.'

Melanie gasped and stared at her. Romaine seemed to be having the greatest difficulty in suppressing laughter. And when the doctor had gone she did in fact burst out laughing, and she continued to laugh for as long as Melanie's indignation remained visible in her expression.

'You have no sense of humour at all,' she gasped. 'Oh, Melanie, what you do miss in life! It can be fun, you idiot, so why don't you break out of that web of misery that surrounds you and seek for a little enjoyment?'

'Do you really consider it funny to say things like that about me?'

'I consider it funny that the silly old fool believed me! You know, Melanie, all men are fools—utter fools! You can do exactly what you like with them!'

'If it so happens that you have the necessary beauty to reduce them to slaves,' was Melanie's contemptuous rejoinder. 'It's always been easy for you, but as I said, the day will come when you'll be sorry for all this.'

'Rubbish! Ah, here's Luke. My, but what a handsome man he is! I know I've said this before, but every time I see him, striding along like this, dressed in tight trews and an open-necked shirt, I feel I could fall madly in love with him. He's the typical outdoor man, tall and brown and strong! And where did he get those looks? I daresay he had French and Flemish ancestors—many of these Afrikaners have. Do you think he'll be glad that I have to stay on for a while?'

'I've no idea what his reaction will be. You implied that he was falling in love with you, so in that case he's bound to be glad.' Of course, he himself could have invited Romaine to stay, and he probably would have done so, decided Melanie, convinced as she had been, right from the start, that Luke was bound to fall in love with her sister.

'The doctor's been, I see.' He looked questioningly at Romaine, his eyes fixed on her lovely face. Melanie, clad in jeans and short-sleeved blouse, felt a wave of inferiority sweep over her when presently Luke transferred his gaze from the seductive vision of Romaine to Melanie herself. That he was comparing she had no doubts at all; she knew he found her drab, uninteresting, plain. Whereas he found Romaine alluringly beautiful in her tasteful, well-cared-for clothes; he found her intelligent, attractive ... desirable. So it had been with Giles, and then with Robin—so it *must* be the same with Luke.

'I've to stay for another few days,' Romaine told him in her best musical tones. 'I'm dreadfully sorry, Luke, but I'm sure you won't really mind my being here?'

'Not at all; if you're not fit to be moved then of course you must stay.'

'Melanie doesn't like the idea--'

'I didn't say so!' cut in Melanie with a flash of indignation. 'It has nothing to do with me, in any case/ 'No, it hasn't, has it? Luke's the one who's being inconvenienced.' Romaine looked covertly at him from under her thick dark lashes. 'I feel so well, and that's the annoying part of it all.' A small pause and then, 'Do you think I could go to the Club?' 'Club?' he frowned, while Melanie, dwelling on what Romaine had just said about feeling well, wondered what the doctor would have to say were he to hear his patient talk in this vein. 'If you're unwell then obviously you can't go out.'

'The doctor hinted that I could.'

'The--!' Melanie pulled herself up short, but she could not disguise her expression and, looking from one sister to the other, Luke said softly,

'Did the doctor hint that you could go out?'

'I've just said so.' Blatantly Romaine came out with the repetition of the lie she had already told; and she looked straight into her sister's eyes, challengingly. 'He suggested that it would do me good.'

Luke's eyes narrowed.

'And yet he says that you can't be moved from here?'

'I think he's anxious that I won't be cared for properly if I go to an hotel.' Romaine produced a devastatingly attractive smile and, watching Luke closely, Melanie noted the admiration that entered his eyes. She moistened her lips, for her mouth felt parched. And she turned away and left them together.

Deborah came to her shortly afterwards, a writing pad in her hand.

'I can't spell Romaine,' she said. 'I can't spell all the other words, but I do want to spell Romaine right. It's such a beautiful name, isn't it?'

'Yes, Deborah, it is.' Melanie spelt it for her and watched as the childish letters took shape. 'Is there anything else you would like me to spell for you?'

'Some words, yes. But it doesn't matter if they're not all right. Daddy says he doesn't mind so long as I write to him.'

'You write very often indeed. You like writing, don't you?'

'Yes, but I like drawing best. I wish my daddy was back home, because I haven't seen him for a long, long time.' The child's lovely

big eyes were shadowed and Melanie caught her close, with a protective arm around her shoulders.

'Daddy will be with you very soon, now, darling. And then you'll be going back to your own home.'

'Will you come to see me? I'll make you a pie, because Mummy showed me how to bake—with flour that makes pastry.'

'I'll be going back to my own home, Deborah, so I'm afraid I shan't be able to visit you.'

'I don't like you going away.' Deborah sucked the end of her pencil and frowned. 'It's a very long way, you said.'

'A very long way. I have to go on an aeroplane.'

'Like Daddy?'

'Yes, that's right.' Melanie looked down; Deborah was still close, clinging with one hand to her skirt while holding both pad and pencil in the other. And it was like this that Romaine found them as she came from the sitting-room into a small cosy saloon which Melanie and Deborah used quite frequently.

'What a charmingly domesticated scene!' she exclaimed. 'What's wrong with the child?'

'Nothing,' abruptly from Melanie. 'Did you want something, Romaine?'

'I want to speak to you in private.'

'You can talk before Deborah; there can't be anything important that you wish to say to me.'

'You're the most unfriendly sister imaginable. Your trouble, Melanie, is that you're totally unrealistic. Why on earth you should continue to have a grudge against me I don't know! If it's Giles then all I can say is that you didn't miss much! He's enough to drive any woman to distraction with his erudite notions which he's for ever pushing at you. I'm all for an intelligent conversation, as you know, but Giles was more than even I could stand!' Melanie said nothing and her sister added, 'As for Robin—well, he's yours if you want him--' Romaine broke off and spread her hands in a gesture of asperity. 'There's been no real harm done if you look at the situation with an enlightened attitude. Your engagement was broken, it's true, but you've said yourself that he's still your type. So it seems logical to me—and sensible—that you and he get together again.' Still Melanie said nothing, and Romaine ended by stating that to take Robin back was the best thing Melanie could do because time was going on and if she was not careful she would end up on the shelf.

'That won't trouble me,' was Melanie's immediate retort. 'In fact, that's where I intend to end up.'

Romaine shrugged and said again that she wanted to speak to Melanie alone.

'Would you like to run away and do your writing somewhere else?' She gave Deborah a dazzling smile to which the child responded at once.

'Yes, of course,' she answered obligingly. 'Shall I come back in a few minutes?'

'Yes—but not too soon.'

Melanie watched Deborah leave and close the door behind her. Then she looked at Romaine and said,

'What is it that's so important?'

Romaine looked at her through narrowed eyes.

'Have you told Luke everything?' she asked, and the tone of her voice was neither pleasant nor smooth.

'What do you mean by everything? He's aware that you stole Robin--'

'You know what I mean! Have you told him about Giles as well as Robin?'

'He knows about Giles too.'

'You rotten little tell-tale sneak! Did you have to open up and let him have the whole story?'

'What is this all about?' demanded Melanie, her anger rising.

'I dislike intensely this atmosphere which Luke creates. I'm not used to being an object of suspicion and contempt!'

Melanie's eyes widened.

'So things are not going quite as smoothly as you would have me believe? You've hinted that's he's falling in love with you, but it looks rather as if that's not quite true, I'm thinking.'

'I haven't said that things aren't going smoothly,' denied Romaine, and it was easy to see that she was furious with herself for the way she had handled the matter. 'Luke can't help but fall in love with me, simply because he's no different from the rest. However, I sensed from the first this thread of censure and faint contempt in his manner and it suddenly dawned on me just now, when I was asking if I could go to the Club, that he knew far more about me than I wanted him to. For if he didn't he wouldn't be so difficult to manage.'

'What you're trying to say, Romaine, is that you've discovered all at once that here's a man who can see through you.' Melanie realized that her heart was beating too quickly, and all because she was beginning to have doubts as to whether Luke was falling in love with Romaine. 'Luke's no fool, and he most likely suspected that you were telling a lie when you said that the doctor had given you permission to go to the Club.'

Romaine coloured with temper.

'You certainly put suspicion into his head with your unguarded exclamation.' She drew closer and her face almost touched that of her sister. 'I'd have killed you if you hadn't pulled yourself up before you'd given me away!'

Melanie stepped back, shaken by this vicious mood of Romaine's.

'Don't be melodramatic,' she said, then added, 'I did pull myself up, so why this unnecessary show of temper?'

'I'm not satisfied with the situation as it is! Luke's filled with pity for you and he's blaming me for your two broken engagements!'

Melanie could see the whole picture clearly. Romaine trying out all her wiles on Luke, but he was not falling as quickly as either Giles or Robin—or any of the numerous other men who at various times had fallen beneath the onslaught of her charms. This kind of situation would not suit Romaine at all. However, the chief thing which occupied Melanie's mind was the mention of pity. Luke was filled with pity for her--

She had said from the first that she did not require his pity, and she would tell him so again—and without much delay 1

'If there's nothing more you have to say, Romaine,' said Melanie at length, 'then I'll go to Deborah.'

'I have just one thing to say! It's time you began thinking of going home!'

Swift anger brought the colour to Melanie's cheeks.

'I shall go when I'm ready—and not before!'

'I can look after Deborah.' Romaine's own anger faded and she spoke in quieter, less hostile tones. 'Be a sport, Melanie and tell Luke you want to go home with Robin. I'll let him know that I don't mind seeing to Deborah until her father returns.' She looked almost pleadingly at her sister. 'You can't gain a thing by staying. And in any case I'm sure you're anxious to get back to England. Go with Robin, and make a fresh start. You were happy with him once and you can be happy again.'

Contemptuously Melanie swept her figure.

'You want the way clear; that's it, isn't it?'

'I'd certainly like to have Luke all to myself. Melanie, please do as I ask. Luke's the only man for me, and while you're here, reminding him that you were treated badly by me, I shan't be able to make much progress.'

'So you admit you treated me badly? That's the first time you've had the decency to own to it.'

'I suppose I was rotten. But this time I'm not doing you any harm--Oh, I know you've fallen for him, but as he hasn't fallen for you your case is hopeless, isn't it? And anyway, Robin's the one for you; recent events have proved it. Sorry I won't be at your wedding, but--' She stopped and turned her head. 'Oh, hello, Luke. Melanie and I are just exchanging confidences.'

'So I gathered,' he replied with an icy inflection. 'I heard something about a wedding?' His eyes, glinting like points of frost, settled on Melanie's hot face. She was acutely conscious of his coldness, but what mainly occupied her mind was Romaine's assertion that he pitied her. 'Whose wedding?'

'Melanie's, of course,' purringly from Romaine. 'She and Robin have made it up.'

Silence followed. Melanie decided without hesitation to refrain from any denial of what her sister had said. In this way she would be proving to Luke that she was not in need of his pity.

'Is this true?' he asked at last, and his tones were ones of quiet unruffled hauteur.

'Yes—er—yes, it is true.'

'Congratulations,' he said, and left the room.

'Are you going home?' Romaine wanted to know, and Melanie nodded her head.

'It'll be for the best.' She looked at her sister, but for the first time Romaine could not meet her gaze. 'I hope I never cross your path again,' and with this Melanie also left the room.

Luke came to her in the garden the following afternoon. She glanced up to note with some surprise that there was a strange hint of greyness about his face that she had never seen before.

'I'd like to know when you're thinking of leaving?' he said frigidly. 'Your sister has offered to stay on and look after Deborah.' He was

frowning and Melanie believed she now knew the reason for the grey tinge to his face. He was worried about Deborah.

'If Romaine's willing to stay on then I'm free to leave just whenever I wish?' She heard the calmness in her own voice and marvelled at it. But she realized that her mind was lazy, unwilling to exert itself in any way at all. She was in the depths of an apathy from which she had no especial desire to emerge, since this was a more comfortable state than full consciousness and the acutely painful presence of the knowledge that Luke and she were now irrevocably separated.

'Of course,' he returned briefly, his eyes hard and cold as they looked down into hers. 'I expect you're eager to get back and get the wedding plans moving. Will you be married before Christmas?'

'No, certainly not before Christmas.' And not ever, she thought, but did not speak this aloud. 'When is Deborah's father expected to be back? It can't be long now, Surely?'

'He wrote to say there's been some delay. He's not expecting to be back until the week before Christmas.' Although it seemed to Melanie that there was now nothing more to be said, Luke remained at her side, much to her surprise. She felt awkward, yet recalled the lovely evenings she and he had known, intimately friendly evenings when awkwardness on her part was non-existent. They were strangers at this moment ... strangers who were separated by the wide gulf of her own defensive attitude and Luke's unfriendliness. But what did it matter? She would soon be gone from here and she and he would never meet again.

Gone--She would miss this beautiful country with its special form of tranquillity and peace. She looked out now, over the wide veld; and the deep solitude seemed to take her protectively to itself; it spread like a veil that takes over when the gentle state of slumber prevails. She glanced up to where a trail of shifting clouds portended

rain—much-needed rain that would leave the earth and its fruits smelling fresh and clean. She thought of what might have been had not Romaine appeared, to cause this rift between Luke and herself.

'What are you thinking, Melanie?' Luke's voice was almost gentle now, surprising her into a swift glance of perplexity. Why the sudden change from the frigid and almost hostile tones he had used a few moments ago?

'I was thinking of this place,' she replied with honesty. 'I've grown to like it very much.'

He looked oddly at her.

'You've no need to leave it,' he reminded her, still in the same quiet unhurried tones. 'It's your own choice entirely.'

She nodded, but it was an automatic gesture.

'It's for the best, Luke,' she said, her eyes pensively resting on the bright-plumaged bird that had flown across the sunlit garden to settle on the mimosa bush close to where she and Luke were standing.

'Would you care to explain why it's for the best?'

She could only shrug her shoulders, for she could scarcely tell him what was in her mind, tell him that she was leaving because she had an idea that he and Romaine would get together and that she, Melanie, had no desire to stay and watch this happening.

He spoke again, saying that she must tell him quite definitely if she was leaving, so that he could give Romaine her answer.

'I'm definitely leaving,' she told him after the merest hesitation.

'Very well,' The tone was cold again and Melanie turned away, unable to bear the icy expression which she knew she would see on his face.

Romaine appeared a moment or two after he had gone, triumph on her face.

'So you've told Luke you're leaving. Sensible girl! You should get in touch with Robin at once; there's sure to be a train leaving Rayneburg before the weekend.'

That she was being pushed away was more than clear to Melanie, but she was indifferent to this fact.

'I'm seeing him this evening; that will be soon enough.'

'But if you went to Rayneburg now you might be able to save some time.'

Melanie looked straight at her.

'You're in a great hurry to get rid of me, aren't you?'

'I certainly shall feel more comfortable when you've gone,' was the frank and brutal admission from Romaine. And then she added, a curious expression on her face, 'Are you really intending to marry Robin?'

'No; Romaine, I am not intending to marry him!'

'How sad ... how very sad. I almost wish I hadn't broken it all up. However, I wouldn't then have met Luke, would I, because you'd never have come over here?' Melanie said nothing and Romaine added callously, 'I have a lot to thank you for, Melanie, since but for you I wouldn't now be in the happy position of being the prospective bride of a wealthy and handsome man like Luke Shadwell.'

'Does it ever occur to you, Romaine, that you yourself might one day have competition?'

Her sister's eyes opened very wide; it was clear even before she spoke that such an eventuality had never for one moment occurred to her.

'Me—have competition? It's the most unlikely thing in the world. When men fall for me they don't get up in a hurry.'

'Giles tired of you,' Melanie could not help saying, simply because she had had far more than she could take and because she did in fact feel—for the first time in her life—that she wanted to inflict, a real hurt on someone.

'He did not! *I* tired of *him* and you know it! How dare you suggest that he was the one who decided to end our marriage!'

'Oh, well, it isn't of any importance now. But what about Robin? That break, I believe, was mutual?'

'Partly,' was the grudging admission.

'So he did tire of you--'

'No!'

'It might interest you to know,' went on Melanie, still in the mood to hurt, 'that Robin now dislikes you intensely.'

Her sister's face turned crimson.

'You and he have been talking about me?'

'Naturally—under the circumstances. Robin's in a regretful mood and now admits that what he felt for you was nothing compared with what he felt for me.' She noted the fury in Romaine's eyes and was glad she

had been able to affect her in this way. It was high time that she knew what humiliation felt like. However, whatever Romaine would have answered to this was never uttered, for at that moment Deborah came racing from the direction of the house, a letter fluttering in her hand. She had been to town with Jancis, who, having called on a casual visit on her way into Rayneburg, had offered to take Deborah with her as the child wanted to see if there was a reply yet to the letter she had written to her father.

'What do you think!' she exclaimed, waving the letter in the air, and in reality offering it to Melanie. 'I asked Daddy if you could stay for ever and look after me, and guess what he said?'

Melanie's nerves tingled, for there was only one answer—judging by Deborah's animated expression and the way she danced excitedly about from one small foot to the other.

'He agreed that I should stay and look after you.'

'Yes, that's right!' Deborah pressed the letter into Melanie's hand. 'Read it! I'm so happy now! Are you happy, Melanie?' No anxiety as to whether or not Melanie would accept; it was taken for granted by the child that, her father having said yes, there would be no difficulty from Melanie. 'Read it quick!'

Taking the letter, Melanie began to read, aware of her sister's interest—angry interest.

The wording was tactful, Kevin merely saying that, if Melanie would agree, then he would be delighted to have her stay to look after Deborah. But she might not want to stay, he had gone on to point out, ending by promising to write to Melanie and see what she thought about the idea. It was a simply-written letter, naturally, but the warning was there, the warning that Deborah must not assume that Melanie would stay; she must wait to see how Melanie felt about the

proposition. But Deborah in her excitement had missed the warning, which was understandable, thought Melanie as she handed back the letter.

'Are you happy?' the child repeated, her piquant little face all aglow with expectancy. 'You see, I'm writing to Daddy now and I want to tell him that you're as happy as I am!' Still no response from Melanie, who was trying to picture what her life would be like working as nanny to Kevin's young daughter. It would be a full-time job, although there would be a few hours off during the day when in a few months' time Deborah went to the small school in Rayneburg. Yes, it might be a pleasant post ... if it weren't for the misery of constantly seeing Romaine and Luke together. And later, if they did get married--No, decided Melanie, she could not accept this post. And yet, as she stared down into that happy little face, she had not the heart to see that happiness wiped away and that shadowed expression reappear in Deborah's lovely eyes, that expression which both she and her father had worn on that first occasion of Melanie's meeting with them. 'Please say you're happy,' Deborah was saying in a beseeching tone. 'You will stay, won't you?' she added anxiously, as a sudden doubt entered her mind at last. 'I want you to stay with me—always.'

And after only the merest hesitation Melanie took the child's hand in hers and said with a smile,

'But of course I shall stay, Deborah, but I won't promise for how long. However, I shall stay until your daddy makes some suitable arrangements for you.' To her relief that satisfied the child, who in an affectionate gesture brought Melanie's hand up to her cheek.

Romaine, who up till now had merely been the scowling onlooker, angrily reminded Melanie that she herself was now employed by Luke to look after Deborah.

'You've sacked yourself,' she snapped. 'In any case, I thought you were most eager to get back to England?'

'I'm no longer eager,' returned Melanie, and marvelled at the way she now felt. It was as if a load had been lifted from her mind and body; she no longer dreaded seeing Romaine and Luke together. On Kevin's return she would be living in his house and she need never set foot in Luke's home ever again. 'No, I'm no longer eager to leave, Romaine. I've grown to love this country and the opportunity of this post is one I don't intend to let slip by.'

'But what about me? I'm supposed to be looking after the child.' She was crimson with fury, a circumstance which left her sister strangely cold and indifferent. 'If you think Luke will allow you to change your mind about leaving then you're mistaken—he won't! Besides, he believes you're marrying Robin!'

'What's the matter, Melanie?' cried Deborah, obviously frightened by Romaine's temper. 'I don't want her to look after me.'

'I'm looking after you, darling, so stop worrying.' With a gentle hand Melanie brought Deborah to her. 'We'll be staying with Uncle Luke until your daddy comes home, and after that we'll all be living in your house.'

'I shall see Luke about this,' flashed Romaine. 'He's offered me the post and I intend to keep it!'

Melanie looked disgustedly at her.

'See Luke,' she said coldly. 'I'm quite sure that in any case of choice between you and me he'll do the obvious thing and ask Deborah which one of us she wants.'

'He'll do nothing of the kind. He'll *tell* Deborah whom she shall have—and it'll be me—just you wait and see!'

'I have no option but to wait and see,' rejoined Melanie unconcernedly, and then, to Deborah, 'Jancis has gone, I suppose?'

'No--Oh, dear, she asked me to say she wants to speak to you importantly. She's on the back stoep.'

'She has something important to say to me?'

'Yes. and she says she's dying for a cup of coffee as well!'

CHAPTER NINE

WHEN Melanie mentioned to her sister that she might one day have competition it never for one moment occurred to her that this would ever happen, either now or at any other time. But the first thing Jancis said when Melanie ran up the steps to the stoep was,

'What do you think! Fay Champion's back in Rayneburg! Fay's Luke's old flame—I told you about her, if you remember? She arrived this morning, having travelled throughout the night on the train. I saw her when Deborah and I were in town this afternoon and we had a chat.'

Melanie's mind computed swiftly and she was soon recalling Luke's admission that the girl possessed a kind of beauty which he had been unable to resist. He admitted that he had been in love with her and had intended asking her to marry him. However, he had also said that when she recently suggested coming out to see him, he had informed her that he was no longer interested. He seemed pleased that she had accepted this and not wasted time in coming over. But, it would appear, the girl had changed her mind.

'Her relatives no longer live here, you said?'

'That's right. However, she made several friends while she was here and she's staying with the Marshall—you've met them at the Club, I expect?'

Melanie nodded her head.

'You've had a chat with her, you said?'

'Just a couple of hours ago.' It was clear that Jancis was faintly amused by what was happening. 'She's as beautiful as ever, and I'm pretty certain that she's here after Luke.'

Melanie glanced curiously at her.

'You don't seem too troubled about it?'

Jancis laughed.

'She can't hurt me this time; I've got over whatever it was that I felt for Luke.' She glanced up to see Romaine approaching, her book in her hand. The sun had tanned her arms and legs beautifully, and she made a most charming picture of feminine allure, charming enough for a glossy magazine, mused Melanie, wondering just how she was going to take this latest piece of news. And what of Luke? What would be his reaction? Melanie felt that the whole situation would have been extremely amusing had she herself been totally aloof from it, unaffected by the charms of Luke Shadwell. 'My case was hopeless,' Jancis was saying, her eyes still on the approaching figure of Romaine, 'so there was nothing to be gained by harbouring optimism, was there?'

'No, there wasn't.' Melanie frowned at the thought that Romaine might decide to join her and Jancis on the stoep. However, the girl merely lifted a hand to Jancis and went into the house.

'Isn't Romaine joining us?' Jancis asked the question a few moments later, after Melanie had requested Elizabeth to bring coffee and cakes out to the stoep. 'She'll not have gone into the house because of me, surely?'

'You mean that she would consider she was intruding?' Shaking her head before Jancis could answer, Melanie went on to add that Romaine probably wished to wash and dress now that she had finished her sunbathing.

But within about ten minutes or so Romaine did come out, much to Melanie's surprise.

Do you want some coffee?' Melanie, desirous of keeping from Jancis the strain existing between Romaine and herself, forced a smile to her lips.

'Please.' Romaine sat down opposite to Jancis, her eyes almost insolently examining her, from head to foot. 'And a sandwich,' she added as Melanie rose to go inside to seek out the servant. 'Ham if you have it.'

When Melanie came out again Jancis and Romaine were talking, although one glance at Jancis's face was sufficient to tell Melanie that she was not enjoying Romaine's company.

'Elizabeth will be out directly with your coffee and sandwich.' Melanie's voice was stiff now; she was angry that Romaine should have intruded when she knew full well that she would not be welcome.

'I'd better be going,' said Jancis eventually, glancing at her watch. 'Shall I see you at the dance on Saturday evening?'

'I expect so.' Luke would have been taking her, mused Melanie, had not Romaine appeared and upset everything. As it was, Robin would be her escort.

'I expect Fay will be there—but meanwhile, you can expect her to be calling on her old flame!' Jancis gave a laugh, but all Melanie's attention was with Romaine, who on hearing Jancis's words had jerked upright in her chair, her eyes wide and puzzled. 'I wonder whether they'll really get together this time? Everyone in Rayneburg will be agog at the reappearance of Fay! They'll guess she's after Luke.'

'Fay ... who?' The two words came from stiffened lips! In fact, Romaine's whole body seemed to have become taut and the colour was fast leaving her cheeks.

Jancis looked at her as she rose to her feet. Romaine was still sitting upright and she lifted her face as Jancis spoke.

'Fay Champion. She was once practically engaged to Luke—' Jancis's voice retreated slowly as the truth began to spread through her mind. 'Are you all right?' she asked, and it was easy to see that the question was put merely in order to give her time to recover from the embarrassing position in which she found herself. Her glance went swiftly to Melanie, whose face was impassive.

'This Fay,' said Romaine, ignoring the question. 'She was practically engaged to Luke, you said? When was this?'

'Oh, some time ago,' replied Jancis, endeavouring to assume a casual manner. 'I expect it's all over, really--'

'You remarked that she's after Luke,' came Romaine's almost harsh reminder. 'Where does she come from—England?'

'Scotland.' Jancis moved uneasily and once again her glance shot towards Melanie. The plea was so obvious that without hesitation Melanie rose and said,

'I'll come to the car with you, Jancis. Excuse us, Romaine; Jancis has to go. She's in a hurry.'

'But--'

'Sorry!' It was a curtly-spoken word and without any further interruption from her sister Melanie led the way down the steps and then walked beside Jancis to the station wagon which was parked at the front of the house.

'Lord, what a fool I am! I'd no idea your sister had fallen for him.'

Melanie turned to her and said, 'It was so obvious, then?'

'But of course it was! I'm terribly sorry, Melanie, for my lack of tact--'

'Don't worry about it,' interrupted Melanie. And she decided to add, 'Romaine and I don't get along all that well, so you haven't upset me in any way.'

'I didn't think you got on too well.' Jancis stood by the door of the vehicle and looked searchingly into Melanie's face. 'You're not alike in any way at all—if you don't mind my saying so.'

'She's very lovely,' murmured Melanie. 'That's the chief difference between us.' She noticed Jancis's brows being raised and was not altogether surprised when she said,

'It's a matter of opinion, Melanie. However, I won't embarrass you by going into that part of it. What I will say is that in many other ways you and she are vastly different.' A small pause and then, 'You know, it could be quite hilarious ... two bitches fighting one another 1 It's usually one bitch to one heroine. Still, Fay's so nice that I suppose you could put her in the heroine's place--' She stopped and then said, 'I've been most untactful again, haven't I? Obviously you wouldn't class your sister as the bitch.'

Faintly Melanie smiled.

'I haven't thought much about it,' she lied, automatically pulling open the door as Jancis made ready to get into her vehicle.

'There's Gladstone,' remarked Jancis with a laugh. 'What a card he looks in that hat!'

Following the direction of her gaze, Melanie saw Gladstone in the shrubbery. He was wearing the brightly-coloured straw hat that had belonged to one of Luke's visitors—female visitors. It shaded his head and eyes from the sun, but it also gave him a comical appearance which afforded him as much amusement as it afforded those who saw

him wearing it. Deborah was with him, Melanie noticed as the child emerged from behind a bush. She was holding a doll, but she was intently watching all that Gladstone was doing. She would be coming with her letter, thought Melanie, and turned to say goodbye to Jancis.

'Deborah'll be going to school soon, won't she?' Jancis asked, and Melanie nodded her head.

'After Christmas—I think it's about the eighth of January that the school starts.' A small pause and then, 'I'm staying on to become a sort of nanny to her. Her father wants me to.'

'Really? But how splendid! I'm glad you're not leaving us, Melanie.' Jancis was in the driver's seat and just about to start the engine when Luke appeared from over a rise. He was on a horse, cantering leisurely along the edge of the field of lucerne.

'I expect Deborah's delighted that you're staying on,' Jancis took her hand from the starter and Melanie realized that she was intending to await Luke's arrival so that she could impart her news.

'She is,' said Melanie, then added, 'It was dreadfully sad about her mother. How old was she?'

'About twenty-six or seven. Tumour on the brain; it was all over and done with in a matter of hours. She went into a coma and never regained consciousness. It was a terrible shock to everyone, because she was a girl who was always full of life. Kevin won't get over it for a very long time to come.'

'No, I shouldn't think he would. Deborah's different—children are, of course. She talks about her mother at times, naturally, but her eyes don't fill up as often as they did.'

'Thanks to you, Melanie.' Jancis was watching as Deborah, having seen Luke, raced away towards him. On reaching her he dismounted

and Melanie could imagine her telling him about the letter she had received. Luke glanced over to where the two girls were standing, Jancis having come from the station wagon. He waved a hand, then walked the horse, Deborah riding on its back.

'I've told Uncle Luke!' she exclaimed when presently she and Luke had reached them. 'He says he's very glad, and I'm glad too!' She was lifted down, but Luke's eyes were fixed on Melanie, the most odd expression in their depths.

'I thought you had altogether different plans,' was his comment after he had sent a smile in Jancis's direction.

'Well—er--' Melanie had no answer; she had been thinking about it for the past few minutes, wondering what she was going to say to Luke when, having learned of her change of plan, he asked about Robin. 'I felt I must stay,' she murmured lamely, wishing that Jancis were not here.

'I see,' abruptly and with the sort of inflection that clearly stated that he did not see at all.

Jancis spoke at last, watching in some amusement as, after imparting her news to Luke, she saw the incredulity appear in his eyes.

'Fay—here!' he repeated. 'You've seen her, you say?'

'Today.' Jancis couldn't resist adding mischievously, 'There's only one reason why she should be here, Luke: she still loves you!'

Luke's eyes narrowed as he said,

'Don't be facetious, Jancis! Fay's here to see old friends—and I don't happen to be one of them!'

With a shrug of her shoulders Jancis said carelessly,

'We shall see, Luke. And now I really must be off! See you on Saturday, Melanie. So long for now!'

'Goodbye.' Melanie waved as the vehicle turned out of the drive into the road beyond.

Luke spoke then, his voice abrupt and puzzled.

'You've definitely decided to stay here, to look after Deborah permanently?'

'I don't know about permanently. For one thing, Deborah's father hasn't yet written to me to ask me to stay.'

Luke's eyes flickered angrily.

'You're evading the issue,' he told her sharply. 'Are you or are you not going to marry Robin?'

The question she had of course expected; it was bound to come, as a natural consequence of her change of plan regarding Deborah.

'I d-don't know,' she stammered. 'Deborah needs me.' She ended on a lame note and heard the indrawn breath which was a sign of Luke's exasperation.

'Am I to take it/ he snapped, 'that Deborah is more important to you than Robin?'

'That's not a fair question--'

'Answer it—before I do you some damage!'

She stared, her nerves alert, her eyes wide with astonishment at this loss of control. For assuredly he was in a temper. She saw that his

eyes were tawny, burning too—like smouldering ashes suddenly fanned to life. She prudently decided to be honest with him.

'I'm not going to marry Robin,' she said quietly, and before she could even take a guess at his intention she found her shoulders seized and she was shaken so violently that the tears sprang to her eyes and within seconds had flooded on to her cheeks.

'Uncle Luke!' cried Deborah, starting to cry. 'Stop hurting Melanie! She's crying—look! I don't like you any more because you're cruel!' and she turned and raced towards the house as fast as her legs would carry her. Vaguely Melanie was struck by the fact that the child meant to bring some help.

'Look what you've done now!' he thundered, and gave Melanie another shake.

'I?' she gasped, sweeping away the tears with the back of her hand. 'You're the one who's to blame— entirely!'

'What did you mean by telling me that damned lie about marrying Robin?' His face was taut and grim, his whole attitude menacing as he stood over her, too tall by far, too overpowering and aggressive.

'I don't understand you at all,' she began, but got no further because Romaine came from the house, walking swiftly towards them, Deborah by her side, trotting to keep up with her.

'What's happening?' Romaine took in the scene— Luke, furiously angry, and Melanie still weeping. 'Deborah tells me that you've shaken Melanie?' Romaine's eyes glittered as they moved from her sister to Luke. 'Is this true?'

Luke turned to her, slowly.

'Quite true,' was his brief and curt reply.

'Well,' began Romaine hesitantly, 'that's not very nice.'

'Please go away,' snapped Melanie. 'This isn't your affair!'

A shrug from Romaine and then, 'If that's how you feel I will go away!'

'And you can go too,' Luke told Deborah, but the child looked up at him, reluctant to leave.

'You won't hurt Melanie again?' she asked.

'No, I'll not hurt her again.'

'All right then, I'll go!'

When they were alone Luke said softly, staring down into Melanie's moist unhappy eyes,

'I hope, Melanie, that the shaking will be a lesson to you not to tell me lies.'

She averted her head, avoiding that stern and accusing Stare. But she was puzzled in the extreme, since it could not matter to Luke whether or not she was intending to marry Robin ... unless--She glanced up then and caught her breath. Thoughts rioted and she was recalling the fact that all was not going smoothly with Romaine in her attempts to bring Luke worshipping at her feet. Melanie had experienced a slight doubt about the likelihood of his falling for her sister but, later, she had once more become resigned, remembering, as she so often did, how easily Romaine had succeeded with Giles and Robin. Why should Luke be any different? Melanie had asked herself.

Luke was speaking, reminding her, in the same quiet accents, that she had not responded to what he had just said.

'I didn't think it mattered—about Robin,' she murmured defensively.

'Why did you tell me that lie?'

'Because I didn't want your pity--'

'My pity?' he broke in, surprised. 'When have I offered you pity?'

'At first you did, and then--'

'True, at first I did. But this is not "at first", is it?'

'Romaine said--' She broke off, this time of her own accord, but Luke was not allowing her to hold back what she had intended to say.

'Romaine said what?'

For a long moment Melanie remained stubbornly mute, pretending that she was interested in the little green lizard that was darting about on the dusty path. Its tongue flicked out with the customary speed of creatures of its kind and Melanie knew that each time this happened it was more than likely that a tiny insect was taken into the lizard's mouth.

'Romaine gave me to understand that you were feeling sorry for me,' she offered when at length it seemed that she would be forced to answer his question.

'I've never told Romaine that I'm sorry for you,' he returned crisply. 'She's obviously misled you.'

'Perhaps.' Melanie frowned a little. 'Does it matter?'

'You obviously considered it did, seeing that you went to the trouble of lying in order to prove to me that you didn't need my pity.' He paused a moment, watching her changing expression. 'Yes, Melanie, I

can see through you. But I wish I could see more!' he added unexpectedly and, without affording her the opportunity of responding to this, he took up the horse's rein and strode away towards the paddock where two other horses were cropping grass.

It was early evening when Romaine sought out Melanie in her bedroom, merely tapping on the door panel before entering. Brush in hand, Melanie turned in some surprise, angry spots of colour fusing her cheeks when she saw who it was who had entered, without so much as a request.

'What do you want, Romaine?' she demanded. 'I'm busy!'

'I'd like to know what was going on between you and Luke! But that's only one thing I've come about!' Romaine's face, red with anger, appeared far from beautiful, especially as her mouth was twisted and her eyes smouldered viciously. 'Why should he be shaking you, that's what I want to know!'

'Then ask him.' Turning again, Melanie began vigorously to brush her hair, her anger revealed in every single stroke.

'So you won't tell me?'

'Romaine,' said Melanie without turning round, 'will you please leave this room!'

Romaine's reaction to this was to take a few steps which brought her closer to Melanie.

'The other thing I've come about is the nasty way you have of twisting things around to suit your own purpose!'

'Just what are you insinuating? Come to the point quickly before I order you out!'

'You got in the first word with Luke!'

'About what?' Melanie could see her now, through the mirror.

'Deborah!'

'Oh, that? Yes, he knows I'm taking up the post of nanny to her.'

'And staying here in the meantime! The post was mine and I told him so!'

'You did?' Melanie now swivelled round on the stool. She was extremely interested in how Luke had taken this. 'And what did he say?'

Seething as she was, Romaine had difficulty with her speech.

'That you must stay. I've lost the job.'

'You never really had it, did you?' No answer from Romaine and Melanie added, 'One can't lose a post that one has never occupied.' Melanie was musing once again on the difficulty which Romaine appeared to be having with Luke. With any other man she would have achieved her object long before now. Melanie had said that Luke was not quite like the rest; she had not believed this at the time, but she did believe it now.

'I shall find some way of remaining here,' flashed Romaine after a long silence. 'If I'd taken up that post it would have given me time--' She stopped, colouring vividly as she realized what she was saying.

'You've never before needed time,' Melanie could not help pointing out. 'Either you're slipping or Luke is tougher than you bargained for.'

Romaine stared, since this was the first time Melanie had ever spoken in this particular way.

'You've changed,' she said, and there was a pettish note to her voice. To Melanie she had never appeared so hateful as now, and all Melanie desired was to escape, to retreat to some safe place where she would never set eyes on her sister again—never as long as she lived. Yet, conversely, regret hovered in her heart and mind as she thought of what might have been had she and Romaine been comrades and friends, sharing experiences and confidences. But for as far back as Melanie could remember they had lived their lives apart, and the climax of their disunity had occurred when, for the second time, Romaine had ruthlessly set out to take Melanie's fiance from her. And even now she was determined to have Luke, despite the fact that she had guessed that Melanie was by no means indifferent to him.

'If there's nothing else you want to say to me,' said Melanie, beginning to brush her hair again, 'then please go--' She broke off as a reverberating noise outside brought a jerk of warning to her brain. 'What on earth was that?' The shuddering trees were the answer. A storm was brewing, a terrifying African subtropical storm. Luke had mentioned them to her, but assured her that they did not occur often. 'It will batter everything down I' almost wailed Melanie, thinking of the lovely flowers in the garden.

Romaine shivered as something crashed outside.

'That sounds like a tree falling on the roof of the garage,' she said and, turning, hastily left the room. Melanie followed more slowly, going to the sitting-room where she found Luke with Deborah on his knee.

'I'm frightened of the wind!' Deborah put both hands over her ears, then leant against Luke's chest; Melanie stood by the door staring at them, and something turned in her heart as her eyes met those of

Luke. His were soft, tender; she knew instinctively that he would make a patient, loving father if ever he had children of his own.

'Are you afraid, Melanie?' he asked, and his voice was -gentler than she had ever heard it. 'Storms like these are rather frightening, I admit, but we have nothing to fear—not inside the house. Damage will be done to some of the buildings, I expect, but there's nothing we can do until the storm abates.'

'Will it last long?' she asked, coming into the room and taking possession of a chair.

'It's hard to tell, but while it does it'll be severe.' He paused a moment before repeating his question, 'Are you afraid?'

'Not really. I'm concerned about the flowers and bushes in the garden. And what about the native huts?' she asked as the thought came to her. 'Will they withstand this wind?'

'Yes, they're safe enough.' He touched Deborah's head gently with his fingers. 'There's nothing to fear,' he told her in soothing tones.

'Can I stay up until the wind dies down?'

'Of course you can--' Luke stopped abruptly, cocking an ear. 'Is that a car?' he frowned.

Melanie nodded and, rising, went over to the window.

'It's a young lady,' she said, staring at the lovely creature who had stepped from the car. Fay Champion--

Luke was on his feet, having put Deborah on the couch. And a moment later the silvery voice was heard, complaining of the wind; it had literally rocked the car, Fay was telling Luke.

'I thought I'd never make it! Oh, but I'm glad to see you again, Luke!'

'You shouldn't have come--' His voice went quiet and Melanie heard no more until the pair entered the sitting-room from the hall. 'Fay, meet Melanie; she's looking after Deborah there.' He gestured towards the couch. Fay was looking Melanie over in the most critical way, but presently she was saying hello to the child.

'Hello,' responded Deborah. 'Did the wind frighten you?' 'Indeed it did.' The girl smiled at the child, then looked up at Luke. 'I arrived in Rayneburg early this morning,' she informed him.

'So I heard.' He was looking intently at her, but Melanie could read nothing from his expression. Her attention returning to Fay, Melanie saw the resemblance of beauty—the clear, almost translucent skin, the fragile quality which, surmised Melanie, would arouse the protective instinct in any male who might be interested in the girl. Yes, she had an especial kind of beauty ... as had Romaine. Melanie turned her head as her sister entered; the next few minutes ought to be amusing, but Melanie, the plain Jane between two inordinately lovely women, felt as if she wanted nothing more than to leave the room.

'Romaine, meet a friend of mine, Fay Champion.' Cool impassive tones, but Luke's eyes flickered with interest from his old love to the girl who was staring almost disbelievingly at her. 'Romaine and Melanie are sisters.'

'How do you do,' said Romaine in acid tones. 'Are you staying here, or in Rayneburg?' Her manner suggested an awkwardness which Melanie had never before encountered in her sister. It seemed as though Romaine—probably for the first time in her life—was lost for words.

'At the hotel in Rayneburg, but I'm hoping my good friend Luke will invite me to stay here.' The look Fay gave to Romaine was clearly a

challenge. 'I used to be a regular visitor here, you see, so I grew to love it.'

Luke said quietly,

'We'll talk about it later, Fay, when we're alone. Meanwhile, you must stay tonight, because it's impossible for you to drive back to Rayneburg in this storm.'

Enchantingly Fay smiled up at him, her enormous eyes expressing pleasure and a pretty, silent 'thank you'.

'You haven't changed a bit! Oh, but it's good to be back in Africa!'

Luke left the room for a few minutes and the three girls were left alone, with Deborah lying back on the couch, her hands pressed to her ears. Outside the wind raged, tearing at the roofs of the buildings, and ripping branches off the trees, branches which now and then smacked against the window, then fell on to the stoep.

'Have you been here long?' inquired Fay, settling down into the luxurious cushions of an armchair as if she had lived here all her life. 'You're looking after Deborah, Luke said, but where are her parents? I remember them well—Deb was only small--'

'Her mother died,' cut in Melanie almost in a whisper so that the child did not hear. 'And her father's in England on business. I've been here a couple of months or so. I came for a visit, but stayed on at Luke's request.'

'At Luke's request,' murmured Fay, her eyes once more examining Melanie's face. 'Luke was having Deb, then?'

'Yes; her father asked him to have her, and that was why he asked me to stay. He thought at first that his aunt would be here--'

'His Aunt Gertrude? Yes, I remember her—happy little person, she was. Has she left him?' added Fay in some surprise. 'She was with his father for years and years.'

'She wanted to go back to England. She's my aunt as well as Luke's, although several times removed,' added Melanie with a swift smile of amusement.

'So you and Luke are cousins?' Fay spoke reflectively, her eyes straying to Romaine, and flickering strangely. Romaine's face was set and stiff, her mouth tight. She met Fay's gaze and there was open hostility in her eyes. Fay seemed to shrug inwardly before transferring her attention once more to Melanie. 'How do you like living here?'

'Very much. It's a beautiful country.'

'It is indeed. I wish I'd never left it.'

'Will you be staying long?' inquired Romaine from the depths of her chair.

'That remains to be seen. It's up to Luke.'

There was an uncomfortable silence after this and Melanie at length took Deborah off to the cosy sitting-room where they sat together listening to the howl of the wind outside and the creaking of the trees as they were tossed this way and that. The ripping off of branches made a shuddering noise, and the smaller twigs still scraped against the window before ending up on the stoep where, suspected Melanie, there would be a pile-up before the squall eventually died away.

'Why doesn't it stop?' complained Deborah, moving closer to Melanie. 'Will you stay with me until it does?'

'Of course,' returned Melanie soothingly. 'In fact, I'm going to ask Uncle Luke if you and I can have our meal in here—together, seeing that you're staying up until the storm abates.'

When this was put to Luke, he frowned at first, but then agreed.

'However,' he said grimly, 'I'm not particularly looking forward to dining with those two.' His eyes were faintly amused; Melanie wondered if he knew that Romaine was equally attracted to him as Fay. After a pause she could not resist saying,

'How strange; I thought you would enjoy the company Of two such beautiful girls.' All she received in response to this was a glowering look before, after stooping to kiss Deborah, he went from the room.

CHAPTER TEN

BY nine o'clock the wind had died down. Deborah, dozing on the couch, was put to bed without her bath and by half-past nine Melanie was back in the small sitting-room, preferring to spend the rest of the evening alone. However, it was not to be, for less than half an hour later Luke entered to inform her in frigid tones that Robin was here.

'He came in this weather?' she frowned, vexed at being brought from her book.

'It doesn't take long to get from Rayneburg. The storm's been over for almost an hour and a half.' His glance was cold, his mouth compressed. Melanie apologized for Robin's presence in his house. This seemed to infuriate Luke because his tawny eyes blazed, but he said nothing and she suspected he was considering it would be more prudent to maintain a silence or otherwise he would say something he'd later regret.

'Do you mind if I see him in here?' she asked, and Luke flicked an impatient hand.

'Do just as you please. He's waiting in the hall at present.'

Melanie went out to him, and invited him into the sitting-room.

'Why did you come?' she asked with a hint of anger. 'We weren't to meet until tomorrow evening.'

'I know, but I just had to see you, if only for an hour.' His face was drawn and haggard; he looked as if he hadn't slept for a week. 'I can't go on like this, Melanie. I'm staying on here only in the hope that you'll change your mind and take me back. I love you,' he added simply and, she knew, sincerely. How sad it all was—how sad that Romaine could break lives in the way she had done. There was Giles, thrown into the inconvenience of divorce, having wasted several

years of his life, and now Robin, who without doubt would be a considerable time getting over his love for Melanie.

'I don't know what to say, Robin.' Distress edged her voice and her lovely eyes held a depth of pity as they looked into his. 'It's all so tragic.'

He came towards her, his hands outstretched.

'There isn't any hope at all for me?'

'I've already told you this,' she replied in gentle tones. 'Dear Robin, I'm sorry for you, but there's no way in which I can even begin to put things right between us.'

He swallowed hard.

'We were so close once,' he murmured, but now she knew that he was reminiscing and that his words had no deeper meaning—no quality of hope in them. 'There's nothing for me but to leave, and this I shall do as quickly as possible.' His hands were still outstretched and on impulse Melanie put hers into them. She was drawn close and she offered no resistance, even though she was well aware that he intended to kiss her. It was a goodbye kiss and she would not deny it to him. His lips were gentle, but quivering too; Melanie took her hands from his and put them around him, a comforting gesture, and he responded.

And at that very moment Luke tapped lightly on the door and opened it at once. The two drew apart, Melanie's face colouring vividly. She soon averted her head, for Luke's expression was excruciatingly painful to her—the contempt, the anger, the condemnation.

'Excuse the interruption,' he said harshly, 'but Deborah's awake and asking for you.'

'I'll go to her.' Melanie's head was still lowered. 'You've been to her?'

'She called out, so I went to her, yes,' and without another word he was gone.

Robin said in a slow and odd sort of tone,

'Is that the way he normally speaks to you?'

She shook her head as she moved towards the door.

'No, of course not. I'll be with you again as soon as I can.'

It was ten minutes later that she rejoined him.

'Deborah's restless,' she said. 'The storm upset her and I don't think she's quite got over it yet. However, she's so sleepy that she'll go off again at once.' She looked at him from where she stood, by the door. 'Will you have a drink before you go?' she asked, acutely conscious of the pity within her but even more aware of the desolation caused by Luke's entrance into the room at that particular moment. The fact that he despised her so much was so hurtful that she could scarcely bear it.

'No, dear, I'll be off at once.' He was resigned but unhappy, so unhappy that his eyes were deeply shadowed and the sides of his mouth grey and drooping. 'Goodbye, my dearest Melanie. I hope that, one day, you'll find the happiness you deserve.'

Her smile was bitter.

'Robin,' she said gently, 'I dare not try again.'

'Because of your sister, I suppose?' He too was showing bitterness.

'Because of Romaine, yes. She could—and would—take even a husband from me.'

Robin gave a deep sigh and nodded his head.

'It's a strange thing, but once I really got to know her I saw nothing attractive in her at all, *nothing!*'

'By then it was too late.'

'What a soul-destroying expression—too late.'

She saw the bitterness in his eyes, heard it in his voice. She wished she could change within herself, and discover that she cared. But this was impossible, and she gently bade him goodbye.

'Will you be going before the week-end?' she asked as he turned to go.

'If there's a train out of Rayneburg, but I have an idea that my particular train doesn't leave until the early hours of Sunday morning.'

This proved to be correct, and in consequence he got in touch with Melanie and the result was that she agreed to let him take her to the dance at the Jasmine Club on the Saturday evening. Robin came with the hired car, which would later be picked up at the railway station by the garage proprietor who had lent it to him. Luke's car was in front of the homestead, ready and waiting to take Fay and Romaine and himself to the dance. He had not asked Melanie if she wanted to go, but when she said she would like to go with Robin he immediately made this easy for her by ensuring that Elizabeth would not be going out.

At the Club all eyes were on Fay, who entered with Luke, Romaine having gone to the powder room to see to her hair and to apply something to her face. Smiles abounded and it was plain that Fay's presence was causing quite a stir.

'Isn't she beautiful!' exclaimed Jancis, having come up to Melanie while Robin was away getting drinks. 'She'll get him and no mistake!' She turned swiftly on hearing a quick intake of breath. 'Oh, hello, Romaine. I didn't expect to see you here--'

'And why not?' insolently and with eyes narrowed to mere slits. Melanie guessed that her sister had overheard what Jancis had just said.

'Well--' Jancis was put out and Melanie frowned in anger that she should be made uncomfortable like this. 'You were supposed to be unwell--'

'Supposed to be? I *was* unwell. The doctor was attending me! However, I'm quite all right now.' Romaine's eyes had travelled to Fay who, ravishing in gold lace and with some rather exquisite jewellery about her neck and wrists, was laughing up at Luke in the most coquettish manner ... a manner to which he was obviously feeling more than a little responsive. For his normally hard features were relaxed in an indulgent smile, and one arm was slid around Fay's slender waist.

'I'm glad to hear it.' Having recovered, Jancis spoke in acid tones. 'You'll soon be leaving us, then?'

Romaine's face was turning pale as she continued to watch the flirting activities of Fay Champion.

'That remains to be seen. Excuse me, please,' and she drifted away leaving behind an exotic whiff of perfume.

'I'm sorry,' began Jancis. 'I wasn't very polite, I'm afraid.' She looked genuinely distressed and in order to put her at her ease Melanie said kindly,

'Think no more about it, Jancis. As I said before, my sister and I are not in the least close. She and I have never agreed about anything, and I'm very sure that we never shall in the future.'

Jancis said nothing, but her eyes wandered to where Luke stood, chatting to Fay and to several others who had joined them. Romaine was standing there, on the outside of the circle, trying to edge her way in so that she would find a position close to Luke. Melanie became fascinated by this performance; never before had Romaine exhibited such lack of self-assurance, never had she been the one outside trying to get in. What was she feeling like? Undoubtedly her fury would be rising, but in all probability she would be able to control it and turn on the charm as soon as the opportunity arose. And this she did. Having gained the position she wanted, she shone up at Luke and her voice could be heard as she asked him to get her a drink. He obliged, although Melanie had the surprising impression that it was not done willingly, but rather for the sake of appearance, since he was unable to refuse without causing some astonishment to his friends standing by.

Robin came with the two glasses, saw Jancis and said, 'Can I get you something?'

She smiled and told him what she wanted. She had seen him in Rayneburg, with Melanie, and when he had gone she said curiously,

'He came with her sister, didn't he?'

'That's right.'

'But you and he... ?' She allowed her voice to fade, and gave a deprecating shrug of her shoulders. 'I'm a real nosey-parker,' she laughed. 'I suppose we haven't much in the way of news here in this out-of-the-way place, so we all tend to want to know everyone else's business, especially the business of newcomers.'

'It's understandable,' returned Melanie in quiet gracious tones. 'And there is a story, Jancis, but as the telling of it would cause me a great deal of embarrassment I hope you'll forgive me if I don't relate it?'

'But of course! You make me feel awful!'

'You needn't feel awful. I will say this much: Robin came here for a special purpose, and as this hasn't materialized he's leaving in a few hours from now.'

'He's in love with you, that's for sure,' declared Jancis. 'Oh, well, that's life! How very easy it all would be if all love affairs went right!'

Melanie looked hard at her and said hesitantly,

'You, Jancis ... isn't there someone?'

'There was, as you know--' Her eyes wandered to the tall aristocratic figure of Luke as he walked towards Romaine, the drink in his hand. 'But not now.'

'This isn't the place to meet people, is it?'

'We don't get many strangers coming, if that's what you mean. I sometimes think I shall go away—to a town—and get a job in an office or something like that.'

'You'd hate it!'

'True, I would.' Jancis stopped as Robin appeared. He smiled rather wanly at her as he put down the glass on the table in front of her. Melanie made a formal introduction and the three chatted until the orchestra struck up, when Robin asked Melanie to dance. As Edward appeared at this moment Jancis also got up. Later, Edward invited Melanie to dance and Robin and Jancis paired up.

It was much later that Luke came to Melanie for a dance. She felt overwhelmed by shyness, tongue-tied and gauche.

'What's wrong?' he inquired, looking down at the top of her head.

'Nothing at all.'

'How's the romance progressing? It's all on again, of course?'

She merely shrugged her shoulders, too dispirited to inform him that Robin would be leaving Africa in a few hours' time. He would learn soon enough. But as she watched his expression she was puzzled, for he seemed suspicious, as if, quite suddenly, he doubted that the romance was on again, as he had put it. She asked him if he had heard from Kevin and he scowled at this unexpected change of subject.

'I've been expecting a letter from him asking me to accept the post of nanny to Deborah,' she added, and saw the frown of puzzlement that settled on Luke's lean and handsome face.

'I haven't heard from him lately.' Luke spoke curtly and she suspected that her refusal to answer his question had been taken as a snub. 'I imagined you'd changed your mind again?' He was clearly perplexed that she had not done so, and once again she felt that he was having doubts about her and Robin having come together again.

'I shall stay for as long as Kevin wants me to.' Her own voice was curt and tight; she had no patience with his suspicions, or his curiosity. She cared not whether he had suddenly reached the conclusion that she and Robin had parted irrevocably. Luke saw the indifference in her eyes and no more was said between them until the music stopped, and then,

'Thanks,' he snapped, and walked away towards the bar. Romaine joined him and he and she chatted and laughed for a few minutes before being joined by Fay.

'You know,' whispered Jancis in Melanie's ear, 'there'll be a scrap between those two before very long.' She was laughing with her eyes, and looking most attractive in this humorous mood. Robin joined them and a flash of appreciation entered his glance as he looked at the girl with whom he had had three dances already, these when Melanie had been claimed first by Edward, then by Van de Westeyn and, finally, by Luke. 'It really is amusing, the way they glare at one another. But you must have noticed; everyone else has.'

'No,' said Melanie, shaking her head, 'I haven't noticed.'

'Have you noticed, Robin?' Jancis gestured with her hand. He looked across at the three standing at the bar.

'Noticed what?' he asked.

'The way Romaine and Fay are with one another.'

'Oh, I see now whom you were talking about when you mentioned the word glaring. If you ask me, that's a mild description of the kind of looks they give to one another.'

'I wonder what Luke is thinking?' mused Jancis. 'He'll not be pleased, that's for sure!'

'Not be pleased?' from Robin in surprise. 'On the contrary, I should imagine he's wallowing in the adulation of two such beautiful females.' The sneer in his tone escaped Jancis, but it was vibrantly accepted by Melanie's ear. She glanced at him, saw the bitterness in his eyes, heard him say, for her benefit only, 'For the first time in her life Romaine has competition. I'll wager she's reaching boiling point inside.'

Despite the fact that he had spoken almost into Melanie's ear, Jancis heard him and she twisted her head sharply, an odd expression on her face.

'You know Romaine very well, don't you, Robin?'

Silence as his eyes met those of Melanie.

'Do you mind if I tell Jancis?' was his astonishing request. And without knowing it Melanie was shaking her head. This he took as an assent and before Melanie had time to say anything he had told Jancis that he and Romaine had until recently intended to marry.

'You were engaged—and then broke it off?' Her swift glance passed from him to Melanie and then to Romaine. 'Yet you came here together?' She just could not contain her curiosity and she made no apology for it. 'Aren't you upset about the break?'

His lips curved in a sneer.

'I'm not upset about the break with Romaine; it's--'

'Please, Robin,' interrupted Melanie, 'you've said enough.'

'I'm sorry, dear.' The look he gave her, contrite, regretful and pleading for indulgence ... it was seen by Jancis, naturally, and her puzzlement increased.

'A mystery,' she murmured, and then, 'Sorry. I'm far too meddlesome; I told you this earlier, Melanie.'

'You must be very puzzled,' sighed Melanie,

'but--' She stopped, to stare at Fay and Romaine who, on their own now, were quite plainly arguing with one another. Fay was cool and arrogant, Romaine on the other hand was definitely heated, her face being flushed and her eyes flashing.

'So Luke left them to it,' softly from Jancis. 'And no wonder! He must be painfully aware of everyone's amusement!'

Melanie frowned as she dwelt on this, and she was recalling her earlier impression that Luke was not over-enthusiastic about going to the dance. The impression was born from something Romaine had said, but at the time Melanie had not taken much notice. However, she was now wondering if Luke had brought the two girls merely for the sake of politeness.

'He'd no need to come,' Robin was saying, his voice breaking into her thoughts. 'But he did, and he brought those two, so it's his own look-out if he's embarrassed.'

Jancis frowned slightly.

'Luke has always put his guests before anything he himself might want. Both Fay and Romaine are his guests, and therefore his first consideration would be for them, and if they wanted to come here tonight he would feel obliged to bring them whether he himself wanted to come or not.'

Robin was not interested; he was brooding inwardly and it showed in his expression. Melanie felt suddenly that the very air around her was oppressive and with a quick word of excuse she left Jancis and Robin together and went outside, into the clear, serenely beautiful night. Here, away from the lights and chatter, she would find solace ... peace. And so she wandered farther into the darkness of the gardens where the luxuriant vegetation blanketed the strains of the orchestra which had struck up again after the short interval. Robin would be all right with Jancis, decided Melanie, refusing to harbour a sense of guilt at leaving him like this. He and she would dance together and Melanie would not be missed.

Where was Luke? she wondered. She had taken a good look around the room, but there was no sign of him anywhere. Perhaps he had gone to the bar, or he might be on the verandah at the other side of the building, taking a breath of fresh air.

Finding a low rocky wall, she sat down, potentially aware of the solitude which surrounded her. Close to lay the gardens and beyond them the silent bushveld, dark, mysterious, intimate. The breeze was warm and sweetly scented; it caressed her face and shoulders and tousled her long shining hair. Peace enveloped her and she knew a strange, unexpected lift of spirit. Thoughts flitted about and one second she was deciding that she must soon be writing to Aunt Cissy, asking her to send on clothes and other necessities which she would find in the flat, and the next second she would be thinking of Luke and confusedly wondering whether or not he really was attracted to one or other of the beautiful girls he had brought to the dance this evening. Two of them--

Suddenly Melanie stiffened, jerking herself upright on the wall, her ears alert. The glow of a cigarette pierced the foliage of a nearby bush and almost at once a slender figure appeared. Moonlight revealed the taut face of her sister who, arrested by the dark shadow rising above the wall, called out sharply,

'Who's there?'

'It's only me.' Melanie's voice was low and slightly tinged with annoyance. Romaine's company was the last she would have desired.

'Oh—can I sit down?'

'Of course. You sound angry.'

'That dreadful girl—Fay Champion! How dare she adopt so possessive a manner with Luke? Just because she knew him years ago! Did you know she left him to go back to an old flame of hers?'

'Someone told you?'

'I overheard a conversation being carried on by some of the local people.' Romaine took another draw at her cigarette before tossing it

to the ground and healing it into the dust. 'I can't imagine Luke taking her back after all this time.' There was an unfamiliar break in Romaine's voice and it struck Melanie that she really was suffering. But whether it was pain that she suffered or the humiliation of defeat it was difficult to tell. 'Have you seen Luke?' asked Romaine pettishly. 'He disappeared a while ago and I haven't seen him since. I want to be taken home!'

'I have no idea where he is,' answered Melanie quietly, aware that she did not like at all the idea of Romaine's use of the word 'home'. This, plus the manner in which she spoke of Luke, seemed to give evidence of the fact that she already considered Luke in a sort of possessive light. It was as if she was thoroughly determined that he should be hers. What Melanie did not know was that Romaine, for the first time in her flirtatious career, was suffering the indignity of her beauty being challenged, and in addition she had just taken a defeat in her skirmish with Luke's old flame. Both these circumstances had undermined her confidence and she found herself in a position she was loath to accept. She had to take it out of someone and her sister just happened to be at hand. Yet she scarcely knew what she was saying as, her temper enveloping her like a net from which there was no escape, she made the wild and totally illogical statement,

'This is all your fault, for changing your mind about leaving!'

'My fault?' Melanie blinked at her, as well she might. 'What is my fault, might I ask?' Her very calmness riled Romaine.

'You're so cool, and arrogant! You didn't used to be like this. You were reduced to tears when I took Giles from you, and the same when Robin and I fell in love. You hadn't the courage to put up even the semblance of a fight! I hate you, Melanie! I hate you for this way in which you treat me!'

Pale but still composed in spite of this violent show of temper and malice, Melanie returned quietly,

'You're not yourself, Romaine. What's happened I do not know—although I can take a guess. But you're talking wildly, and in a way which, by the morning, you'll regret. You see--' Melanie got no further; her words having added fuel to the fire of her sister's wrath, she felt herself reeling over the wall as Romaine, striking out viciously, sent her sprawling backwards, her arms and legs flying. Automatically flinging one hand towards the ground on realizing that inevitably she must hit it, Melanie cried out as, the wrist-bone cracking, the pain shot excruciatingly right up her arm to the shoulder. 'Oh, what have you done to me?' She was gasping with pain, expecting Romaine, overcome by contrition and anxiety, to come over the wall and help her up. But there was not even a sound to reach her ears, much less any practical help, as, one arm hanging helplessly at her side, Melanie managed to get to her feet.

Romaine had gone!

Thoroughly shaken by the fall, and suffering from shock, Melanie sat down again. But the pain was too much to bear, and in addition the bone was displaced and a swelling beginning to rise all around it. She rose unsteadily to her feet, and it was just at that moment that another figure appeared, a tall lithe figure which she knew so well.

'Melanie ... what are you doing out here all on your own?'

'I—I came for a stroll--' Tears were streaming down her face and she turned from him, ashamed of the little access of self-pity which was affecting her. 'I wanted to be quiet for a few minutes.'

To her surprise Luke laughed—a harsh laugh yet edged with amusement for all that.

'Funny thing, so did I--' He broke off as, a stab of pain shooting along her arm, Melanie uttered a little sobbing moan. 'What's wrong?' His eyes scanned her face as she turned. 'Are you ill--' He saw, then, the arm which she had now brought up and was holding against her chest, the other hand beneath the wrist, supporting it. 'What have you done?' He stepped closer, his tone changing, his attitude one of deep concern. She lifted her eyes in the moonlight and he saw the tears glistening on her lashes.

'I fell off the wall, and I think I've broken my wrist.' Her voice faltered and another little moan escaped her. 'It's dreadfully painful, Luke. It needs some sort of treatment, I think.'

He had hold of the wrist and his strong fingers probed, causing her to flinch.

'Hospital treatment,' he decided. 'Come, I'll take you in the car.'

Once she was seated on the driver's side Luke wanted to know how she had managed to fall off the wall. He was driving quickly out of the Club grounds and his eyes were staring straight ahead.

'I just fell,' she replied. 'You know how these things happen.'

'No,' he said, 'I don't.'

A trifle put out by this brusque remark, she found herself at a loss for words. And after a moment or two Luke repeated his question.

'I toppled backwards,' she explained. 'And naturally put out a hand to save myself.'

'I see.' He sounded as if he did not see at all, but no more was said and within a few minutes the hospital was reached and Luke slid the car to a standstill under a brilliantly lighted canopy extending over the front entrance of the building.

An hour later they both emerged, Melanie's arm encased in plaster up to the elbow.

'Six weeks!' she exclaimed, not for the first time. 'It'll seem an eternity.'

'I'm sure it will,' he agreed readily. 'However, it could have been a lot worse; you could have fallen on your head.'

She nodded and said yes, she had already thought of that.

'At least with this there'll not be any after-effects,' she added.

'For which we must be grateful.'

We--And there was in his voice something which set her nerves tingling and her senses alert.

On arriving back at the Club he stopped the car under a clump of trees but made no attempt to get out.

'I don't expect you want to go back in there?' he said.

'No—but Robin will be wondering what's happened to me, so I shall have to go back in.'

'Shall I speak to Robin for you?'

'If you don't mind.'

He left the car and Melanie sat back, relieved that the doctor had given her something for the pain. Vaguely she wondered what was Luke's intention, but her mind felt too drugged to deal with such a question. However, on his return he stated firmly that he was taking her home.

'But what about Romaine and Fay?' she asked.

'Robin will bring them home when the dance finishes.'

Melanie said without thinking, 'Romaine wants to come home now.'

Luke had already started the car and he continued to nose it from under the trees.

'She does? How do you know that?' Cool tones but edged with curiosity.

'She told me, earlier on, that she wanted to be taken home.'

'Earlier? Then why didn't she mention this to me?'

'You weren't about.'

'So she told you after I had left the hall?' The car was almost at the high gate and even as he spoke Luke was turning it into the road. The lights were being left behind and after the town was skirted nothing but the dark veld lay around them, with drifting glimpses of native huts or trees or kopjes appearing, highlighted by the moon's silver rays as they pierced the thin cloud layer.

It was some time before he received an answer to his question since it was now occurring to Melanie that she was nearing the point where she might have to give away the fact that the accident was caused by her sister.

'Yes, it was after you had left the hall.'

'How long after?' Luke was acting rather strangely, she thought, since it would appear that he was probing far too deeply into the matter.

'I didn't take much notice of the time.'

For a while there was silence between them, with Luke sitting in the most casual pose, hands lightly resting on the steering wheel, eyes ahead. The light of the headlamps threw into relief the bright white bungalows which were now appearing, scattered prettily on the hillside or along the roadside. Bushes and small copses came and went, living for a bright illuminated moment before melting back into the slumbering darkness of the landscape; moths by the hundred fluttered before the headlight glare, like snowflakes wrapped in fine gold leaf. And in the vast dark vault of the sky a myriad stars twinkled, clear and blue as the purest diamonds.

Having reached a particularly lonely place in the road Luke turned off; the car rocked drunkenly on a rutted and stony track and even as Melanie opened her mouth to ask what this was all about the car dragged to a stop and the brakes were applied.

'Don't speak,' was his first command as, reaching up, he snapped on the interior light. *'I'm doing the talking, and as I'm in no mood for subtleties I'll come straight to the point—or perhaps I should say, points, since there are several which I shall bring up. First, I want to know exactly what happened when you fell off that wall?'*

'Is it important, Luke?' This stopping of the car puzzled her, as did Luke's manner, for although it was calm, unruffled, she had the strange impression that there was an unfamiliar tenseness within him; she also had the impression that it would not take very much provocation to make him lose his temper. In fact, her question brought an impatient intake of his breath and his voice was sharp and short as he replied,

'I wouldn't otherwise have asked it, since I'm not in any mood to waste words!' *"Do you mind telling me what this is all about?"*

He turned in his seat, and looked narrowly at her. Emotions stirred and she lowered her lashes, automatically fingering the hard white

ridge of plaster that covered her wrist and reached right down to the knuckle bones. -

'A few moments before I came upon you out there in the Club gardens Romaine ran past me; so great was her hurry that she didn't see me, and she was muttering to herself something that sounded like "It serves her right". She came from the direction of the wall.' A pause ensued as he gave Melanie the opportunity of commenting, but a silence pervaded the car as she sought vainly for words which would shield her sister. 'I suggest that it was then that she told you she wanted to go home?' Again no sound from Melanie and he continued, 'She had something to do with the fall.' It was a statement, but Melanie automatically shook her head and said she would rather not talk about it, whereupon he nodded perceptively and told her that her reticence was adequately revealing.

'You and she had quarrelled, that was obvious from her mutterings. It was also obvious that she was in a temper and I strongly suspect that Romaine in a temper would stop at nothing. And although you won't speak, I know that in some way she was responsible for your fall—I knew it almost at once, but naturally I was far more concerned with the matter of getting you to hospital than in wasting precious time analysing the situation.' He looked sideways at her, noting her pallor, and a frown crossed his face. 'Either she hit out at you deliberately or she gave you a push that caused you to lose your balance. Are you going to tell me—What the quarrel was about?'

'It was more an argument than a quarrel,' she said, and he uttered an exasperated sigh.

'Very well! Point two,' he said abruptly, his swift change of subject giving her a jolt, 'might cause you a little embarrassment. But should it also cause you to shrink away and tuck yourself into that armoured shell which you manage always to keep handy, then despite the fact that you've broken your wrist I shall give you something that'll make

you tingle for a week —and sitting down more than a little difficult!' Impatience mingled with the hint of anger in his voice, but amusement was also there ... and the note that warned her he was quite ready to carry out his threat. 'Point two, Melanie, is: what were you doing allowing Robin to make love to you like that?' Just as he expected she blushed hotly, but she was prudent enough not to 'shrink away ... into that armoured shell—'

'He wasn't making love to me—I mean,' she amended on noting the swift and sceptical raising of his eyebrows, 'it wasn't what it appeared to be.'

'Really?' with a further lift of his brows. 'It looked perfectly plain to me.'

'I don't understand what this is all about?' she said impatiently. 'I'm very tired, Luke, and would like to go to bed.'

'Avoiding the issue again! Melanie, don't, I beg of you, goad me any more! You know darned well what this is all about! Would I bring you here, and sit and talk like this, if there wasn't something important afoot? Open your eyes, girl, and see what you ought to have seen long ago—before that sister of yours came poking into our affairs, convincing you that she could take me from you!' He was in a temper now, but Melanie, having fully absorbed what he had been saying, knew no fear of that temper; on the contrary, the very fact of its existence brought an onrush of pleasurable sensations such as she had known prior to the appearance on the scene of Romaine, when, her friendship with Luke being strengthened every day, Melanie allowed into her consciousness glimpses of a happy future with him, here in this beautiful country.

'Luke,' she faltered at last as she heard his angry intake of breath as his patience began to run out, 'are you t-telling me that we—you and

I—can--' She got no further because of the tightness in her throat and the fact that no words of affection, even, had ever left his lips.

'Yes,' he snapped, 'that's exactly what I am telling you!'

'Oh...

'And perhaps you'll now tell me why you were allowing Robin to make love to you!'

'He wasn't, Luke. We were saying goodbye.'

'You--!' He stared at her. 'What, then, were you doing with him this evening?'

'His train doesn't leave Rayneburg until early tomorrow morning, so he asked if he could take me to the dance.' She paused, searching his face for some sign of softness, but all she saw was a tight unreadable mask and she added hurriedly, 'It was all over before he arrived in Rayneburg, Luke. I knew I could never take him back.'

'Because... ?'

She hesitated, but only for a moment.

'Because I'd begun to care for you,' she answered simply, and the next second she was in his arms and his mouth had found her tender, quivering lips. The kiss was long, and gentle, and when at length he drew away his arms remained about her.

'I was so sure—before those two arrived. But then you encased yourself almost immediately and I began to wonder if you were despising yourself—for the discovery that you still wanted Robin.'

'There were so many misunderstandings,' she whispered, turning her face to his, inviting a kiss. He took her lips again, but this time there

was less gentleness in the pressure of his mouth on hers. Ardency and desire were no longer held back. 'You see, how was I to know that you loved me?' Although it suddenly struck her that he had not as yet mentioned love, she knew there was no need for words.

'There were numerous signs which, had you not been so obsessed by the conviction that Romaine held some sort of magic power over men, would have flashed out at you like a beacon on a headland. What about when I gave you that shaking?'

She blushed and said, 'What about it?'

'Wasn't that proof and enough that I cared? It happened as a result of your telling me that you weren't marrying Robin after all. You remember?'

Remember-- She was not likely to forget that shaking in a hurry!

'Well,' she returned plaintively, 'one would scarcely take such treatment as a demonstration of love!'

He laughed heartily and said,

'I don't expect it seemed to be one at the time, but had you thought to ask yourself why I should have acted so, you'd have come up with the one and only answer: I was so relieved by your statement that you weren't intending to marry Robin that I just had to punish you for my previous sufferings--'

'Sufferings!'

'It might interest you to know, my girl, that I was almost out of my mind, believing that you'd marry him, accepting second best!'

'I must admit,' mused Melanie after recollection had come rushing in, 'that I recall being somewhat puzzled by your anger, and I recall also

that I related it to the fault of Romaine's not being totally successful regarding her plans for you and her--' She stopped, but it was too late. Luke was nodding and his eyes had taken on that tawny hue.

'She tried, didn't she? I've never been so bored in the whole of my life. I had to tolerate her in my home, firstly because the doctor said she must not be moved, and then, later, because she was your sister. I just hoped that she would take one or more of the numerous hints I gave her and leave. She became a nuisance to me and that's why I invited Fay to stay with me.' He paused, and he and Melanie just sat quietly in the car, potently aware of each other's nearness, and of the peace and silence of the bush around them. Shrubs and trees formed dark silhouettes against the purple sky; in the distance the vague outline of the mountains reared up to merge with the cloud cover above them. The silence seemed to widen before being broken as Luke murmured reflectively, 'So Romaine actually admitted that things were not going her way?'

'Yes, and that's why she was so anxious for me to leave.' Once again she realized she had said too much. Luke's eyes glinted, but he refrained from comment, reverting to what he himself had said.

'If she admitted that things weren't going her way then why did you keep up that defensive attitude?'

'Because I believed she would get what she wanted in the end--'

'Stupid child! My little one, you'll be lucky if you escape my wrath!' But in contrast to his forceful threat his arms were gentle as he drew her to his breast, taking infinite care not to touch her injured hand. 'What am I to do with you?' he asked with tender emotion. 'For the moment, I can think only of this--' His lips, strong and cool and masterfully possessive, claimed hers and held them captive for a long long moment. 'Dearest Melanie, I love you--' Another silence, and so Melanie never voiced what she had intended voicing—that she

naturally felt convinced of Romaine's success with Luke simply because she had been so successful with both Giles and Robin. Anyway, what did all this matter—this unhappiness of the past? It had been a prelude to this magic realm of true love and friendship in which she now found herself.

'Little one,' he murmured close to her cheek, 'there are several minor questions that need clearing up between us, but you're tired and need to be put to bed--'

'Put!' she ejaculated, drawing away from him like a frightened child. 'Not *put*, dear Luke!'

'Put,' he said inexorably, gently tapping the plaster. 'You're minus a right hand, my love.'

'Yes, but--'

'No buts! Obedience, little one! This is one of the first things my wife must learn!'

'I'm not your wife--'

'You will be within a week-- No, my love, no arguments. I know what you're going to say: you can't get married with your arm in plaster. Well, we shall see!'

Melanie had to laugh, a happy, carefree laugh that seemed to fascinate him.

'How I've wanted to hear you laugh like that,' he said. 'My dearest sweetheart, I hope I shall always make you happy.'

'There's no doubt about that,' was her fervent rejoinder as she lifted her hand to touch his lean brown cheek. 'Have I said I love you?' she asked with shy hesitancy.

'No, dear, you haven't,' he grinned, and she gave another laugh.

'Then I'll say it now. I love you, dear, dear Luke.'

He kissed her then, and caressed her face and her neck, and lifted her hand to his lips in a gesture that savoured of homage.

"What about Deborah?" Melanie was saying as they continued their journey home a few minutes later.

'Kevin will have to make other arrangements—just as he would have done had you not appeared on the scene. There's no immediate problem, as she can remain with us until Kevin returns, which will be before Christmas, so it won't be long now.'

'He'll be able to get a nanny for her?'

'Probably. However, she's used to being with her daddy—there's been only the two of them since her mother died. And in any case, she'll be going to school very soon after Christmas.' He paused and then, 'Fay and Romaine will be told to leave immediately, though I rather think they won't need any telling when we inform them, at breakfast tomorrow morning, that you and I are engaged to be married.'

'Married--' Melanie repeated slowly. 'I can't believe it I' The lights of the homestead suddenly appeared through the trees, twinkling and moving with the stirring of the foliage. 'We're home,' breathed Melanie, and Luke turned then and smiled tenderly at her. But he said nothing until the car had crunched to a halt and he had switched off the headlights.

'Yes, home, my Melanie. We're home ... together--'