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# CLOSE CAPTIVITY

**Elizabeth Power**



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Jade Napier resented her millionaire father's decision to hire a bodyguard to protect her. She resented the restrictions it placed on her life. Why, she was practically a prisoner in her own home! But more than anything, she resented the bodyguard himself. Not only did Kent Solomon let her know he'd taken the job reluctantly, he seemed to believe every bit of bad press about her -- all the newspaper stories about her supposed affairs and irresponsible behavior. He told her in no uncertain terms that he was immune to her charms. Unfortunately, Jade had to admit she wasn't immune to his... Angry and humiliated, she determined to make Kent Solomon's job as difficult as she could. But, somehow, he always seemed to be one step ahead of her.

## CHAPTER ONE

LAUGHING, Jade caught the wedding bouquet to a surge of rousing cheers, breathing the peppery scent of yellow and purple freesias that dominated over the rest of the blooms.

'You've had it now, Jade! That means you're next!'

Fresh laughter rippled across the small Cotswold churchyard with the bride's playful warning, and a fountain of animated enquiry rose up from among the hundred or so guests.

'Care to name anyone, Jade? It isn't Juan Rodriguez, is it?' And then the question of questions, 'Does Daddy approve?'

With feigned, smiling insouciance, she ignored their well-meaning remarks, picking her way past a sea of curious faces—past the panther-like vigilance of the Press. There was always the Press. And no more voracious than at a society wedding, she reasoned with cold resignation, the dark, floppy-brimmed hat casting a shadow, hiding the poignant pain in her face as she hugged her newly-wedded friend.

'Congratulations,' she whispered, then with cool deliberation handed the flowers to the matronly figure at the girl's side. 'You'd better have these,' she recommended, knowing the woman's penchant for pressing flowers would surely extend to her daughter's wedding bouquet. Apart from which, she couldn't envisage herself making any wedding plans again in a hurry, loving and trusting a man so completely as Roberta.

'Thank you, Jade.' They were accepted with cool grace, though the woman's less than friendly attitude conveyed what her words didn't dare. That Jade Napier wouldn't have been on the wedding list if she had had anything to do with it; that she was a bad influence upon her daughter who, swathed in white, arm locked inextricably with her new husband's, was radiating a happiness Jade acknowledged with a

wrenching envy, the veiled golden hair adding to that angelical quality about her friend which she knew she herself could never hope to emulate—and that no one would believe even if she tried to. Including the man standing alone near the conifer-fringed wall, who she sensed had been watching her with disconcerting intensity for the past few minutes.

With the advantage of high-heeled shoes adding to her five feet eight inches, she looked past the other guests to meet eyes that were cold and decidedly unwavering, features that were too strong and hard-hewn to be termed handsome. Striking was the word that sprang instantly to her mind with her swift, deliberate assessment of his appearance. Strong, tawny hair—thick and wavy—that forceful countenance set off by deep-gold skin, he was built like a cliff-face—rugged, hard and invincible. No fat, just solid muscle beneath the light lounge suit that fitted-perfectly over the imposing lines of his physique, his very clothes setting him apart from the rest of the male contingent in their grey toppers and tails, evidence that he was a man who didn't bow easily to convention. He wasn't even wearing a carnation!

Such blatant disregard for protocol sent a small shiver of excitement through her, appealing to her own streak of rebelliousness. There was something vaguely familiar about him, though—so vague that she dismissed it—realising, as he dipped his head briefly in acknowledgement, just how obvious her interest in him had been.

Blushing, quickly she glanced away, ostensibly to watch the newly-weds stepping into the gleaming black saloon, conscious of cameras clicking, confetti being thrown, while one tiny recalcitrant bridesmaid ran, giggling, out of her mother's reach, across the grass.

Jade could still sense the man watching her, and she glanced back, oddly unsettled. But she was curious too, and this time she didn't look away, returning his gaze with steady blue eyes and, spurred on by a

need to know where she might have seen him before, offered him the demurest of smiles.

Most men, she knew, usually melted or fled from any flicker of interest from her. This man did neither, the impervious lines of his mouth evoking such a ghost of a response that it might easily not have existed, his expression coolly amused as he observed the sudden panic in her face, the fear that she had played her best card and lost. No man had ever shown such total immunity to her before!

Suddenly, to know who he was became of paramount importance, something stronger than pride impelling her to push her way through the happy, oblivious crowd. Pulse beating with an unknown nervousness, she came into the shade of the conifers, and felt that cool gaze sweep the full length of her body—over the blue floral silk suit that swirled gently around her calves.

'Quite spectacular.' His voice was cordial-rich, the deep, articulate tones suggesting an intellectual background—a bone-hard confidence that was clearly de-fined in that strong nose and jaw and that firm, incisive mouth—even though he was smiling now; in the poised self-assurance of his stance. 'Not many women would have the courage to wear four-inch heels with that magnificent height.'

Even more out of character, Jade felt warm colour creeping up her throat, absently aware of the congratulatory voices and laughter on the air behind them, of the fresh breeze unsettling the conifers as she responded with an almost self-derisive smile.

'My motto is if a man can't look me in the eyes, that's his problem,' she disclosed with quiet teasing, wholly conscious that she would pose none for him. Even in her heels, this man topped her by a good three or four inches, and, tilting her head, she enquired rather pointedly now, 'Do we know each other?'

Eyes that, from this distance, were a cold slate-grey were surveying her oval face, taking in the stark contrast of raven hair and fair skin, the heavy-fringed blue eyes, soft curve of cheek and full, well-shaped mouth and the rather haughty nose that kept her from being truly beautiful like Roberta.

'I don't know,' he said, his tone implying a barely casual interest. 'Do we?'

His response unhinged her and for a moment she didn't know what to say. About to introduce herself, she held "back. Perhaps he didn't know who she was, and suddenly, more than anything, she wanted to remain anonymous to him, at least for the time being, asking instead, 'Are you a friend of Roberta's?'

A sudden gust caught the wide-brimmed hat and her arm shot up, drawing that disconcerting gaze to the generous curve of her breast. 'No.'

The groom's, then, she thought, feeling her attempts to know more about him being strangely thwarted when he supplied nothing further. Not even his name. Clearly, for some reason, he was being as cagey as she was, she sensed, refusing to nurture the sudden, alarming notion that it was simply out of a plain lack of interest in her.

'That was a very magnanimous gesture of yours just now.' That strong chin jerked in the direction of the woman still holding the bouquet. 'Or was it merely out of fear of tempting fate?'

Silently those grey eyes were mocking her, and she lifted her chin almost in defiance, the cynical twist of her smile concealing a poignant emotion as she breathed, 'Or just the wrong man.'

The tawny head dipped. '*Touche*,' he said quietly, and the smile that irradiated his features displayed a charm that was wholly lethal, the tug of a vibrant magnetism creating a havoc of sensation inside of her.

'Roberta's lucky,' she said, with a wistfulness she had no way intended, glancing back as a chorus of cheers rang out, drowning the sound of the bridal saloon purring away. 'She's known Jonathan since childhood... since we were at school together.' The best girls' school in England, and from where she, Jade, had emerged, a part of the so-called 'privileged set', for men to exploit and the public to judge and the tabloids to make mincemeat of.

'That's no recommendation,' he said sagely, as if he had detected that small twist of sadness in her voice. 'Apart from which, I seldom believe in luck.'

No, he wouldn't, she thought, her eyes guarded and cool. That restless vitality and force she sensed behind that powerful physique typified him as a go-getter, a man who, when his mind was made up about something, wouldn't let luck or any other element of chance stand in his way.

That earlier excitement she had felt flowed in a fresh surge along her veins. Perhaps it was those qualities she knew so well in her own father—even if they were often directed against her—that had helped her to recognise them in this man. She only knew that for once in her life she felt sure about something she wanted. She couldn't let him get away.

'That makes us two of a kind!' She laughed, a light bluff in response to his comment about luck, holding her hat again as the gusty May breeze took her skirts, catching them against her legs. 'Weddings are great...' She was using every ounce of charm she possessed, flashing even white teeth in a smile of stunning brilliance '... but they always leave me feeling deflated afterwards—like pre-lunch cocktail gatherings one leaves feeling all dressed up with nowhere to go!'

He smiled absently, whether in agreement or out of politeness she wasn't sure.



'I find it hard to believe a girl like you would ever be deflated for long.' Raw appreciation of her burned in his eyes, though there was a mocking, almost cynical curve to his lips. 'Where's the boyfriend that was mentioned? Or isn't he with you? Doesn't he worry, letting you out alone with all that fetching elegance and style?'

She gave a small nervous laugh, sensing his compliment to be double-edged. But Juan hadn't come with her—and for no greater reason than that there wasn't as much between them as people wanted to make out.

Unbalanced, though, by that unprovoked cynicism, somewhat carelessly she answered, 'Juan isn't the worrying kind. What about you? Are you with... ?' She made a deliberate show of glancing past him, though she had already deduced that he had no female companion with him, and he wasn't wearing a ring.

'No, I'm alone,' he supplied laconically, slipping a hand into his trouser pocket, adding with almost sardonic charm, 'Would you have come across to me if I weren't?'

His bluntness galled. Barely aware of the slamming of car doors and the shriek of a bridesmaid above the general buzz of conversation, agitatedly Jade brought her tongue across her top lip. 'You're very.. .sure of yourself.'

A tawny brow lifted in a censuring arc. 'So are you.'

Yes, but not usually. Never before! her mind screamed at him, because she wouldn't normally have approached any man—let alone one so devastating! But she couldn't tell him that, struggling for a mien of calm as his mouth tugged in a mere token of a smile and he said, 'Don't get a complex. I'm sure most men would be flattered. The truth is, little lady, that you're too rich, too pampered, and far too undisciplined for me.'

Jade flinched, but said steadily, 'You know who I am?'

He surveyed the blue eyes—that spark of pique that hid the underlying defeat and desolation—and shrugged. 'Doesn't everyone? The daughter of one of Europe's leading grocery barons with an empire stretching from here to eternity isn't exactly unnewsworthy. Educated in English schools and university. Homes in London, Italy and the States. Twenty-two—unmarried. One younger brother—and a reputation. I'm sorry to disappoint you, Jade, but I'm much too old and conservative for the type of lifestyle you lead. Apart from which, I'm really not the partying type.'

He could have got those facts about her from any number of gossip columns, but the storing of such thoroughly comprehensive data by such a hard-bitten stranger made her feel uneasy. Also, with cutting dexterity he had reminded her of the scandal that had filled the papers about her eighteen months ago. Of the accident following that crazy party. An 'orgy', one tabloid had termed it, her car coming off the road afterwards and injuring an innocent bystander only adding kindling to its cruel speculation. Reporters, always greedy for any gossip about her before, had hounded her ever since, making sensation out of even the most innocent situation.

Pain furrowing her brow, Jade lifted her gaze to his, her lashes concealing the deep hurt within her as she considered how old he probably was. Certainly no more than thirty-five or six. And most definitely a man who wouldn't be out of place anywhere, no matter what he had said to the contrary. 'You really shouldn't believe all you read,' she advised with an injured little smile, trying again.

'Oh, I try not to.' His smile was without humour. 'I'm very open-minded, believe me.'

But not about her, she realised with bitter acceptance, detecting the scepticism in that deep voice. And who could blame him when that

photograph of her—half- naked at that riotous party—had been so startlingly published to damn her, appearing in the papers the day after that accident for all the world to see?

'Then perhaps you should stop being so conservative and try living a little,' she suggested with deliberate tartness, embarrassed because she had made such a fool of herself when obviously he hadn't been interested, maintaining the reputation she had promoted because he clearly wouldn't have believed anything else. And she couldn't tell him the truth. 'Perhaps if you let your hair down for a change it might rejuvenate you a bit,' she breathed caustically, hardly daring to admit that no one looked less in need of rejuvenation than he did. 'As for the money...' she shrugged, adopting a hard front—the one she had nurtured, the one the world expected... 'you really shouldn't let it make you feel *too* inferior...'

Some dark challenge flared in his eyes, making her suddenly afraid. Why on earth did she have to say a thing like that? she rebuked herself, and was relieved to hear someone calling her—some girl she'd barely recognised from her schooldays—and, glad to be able to get herself out of this awkward situation, she murmured with well-rehearsed composure, 'If you'll excuse me..'

With cool, innate courtesy the man bowed his head, an indefinable curve to his lower lip. 'Perhaps I'll see you around.'

It was merely a parting statement—spoken for something to say, that grey gaze lancing across her now with only a cool dismissal so that only she bore witness to the bitter ache deep down inside her as she uttered woundedly—meaningfully, 'I don't think so.'

He wasn't at the reception.

In a palatial country hotel, to everyone else Roberta's wedding reception was a grand and joyous occasion, and Jade tried to look happy for her friend's sake, but it took every shred of energy she possessed.

The episode with that stranger had depressed her. That was the simple truth, and she couldn't understand why she had let it affect her so much. She was used to the things the papers said about her; the cheap sensationalism churned out to make dramatic reading out of the mundane aspects of her life. But it wasn't until a man with that intense, sexual magnetism and strength of character—because there had been strength there, and quite dauntingly so—was swayed into believing the worst about her that she realised what a cruel hand fate had dealt her eighteen months ago. It hadn't been made any easier, either, by Russ's jilting her as he had.

'All alone?' Roberta's innocent observation was like a parody of her own thoughts, and with a swift draught of champagne Jade dismissed the past. She had survived Russ's broken promises, if not wholly unscathed. But that unsettling meeting with that man in the churchyard earlier refused to be dismissed so easily, her hopes that by not raising the issue of his identity with Roberta would attach less significance to it dashed when the other girl enquired with a rustle of white satin, 'So where's Tarzan? That stupendous-looking man I saw you with outside the church?'

Jade looked, puzzled, down into her friend's radiant features. 'I was hoping you could have told me.'

The other girl shrugged. 'I asked Jonathan and he said it must have been someone you'd brought who you were keeping all to yourself.'

Surprise and bewilderment tinged Jade's voice. 'You mean. ... he wasn't a friend of his?'

"Fraid not. I would have asked him to have introduced me if he were!"

Uneasy, Jade laughed at her friend's teasing allusion to having any interest in any other man. She knew that Jonathan Bridleton would be the only one Roberta would ever have eyes for. Her uneasiness, though, persisted— especially as that stranger had related such full and accurate facts about her—that familiarity about him still nagging at her even when she was driving back to London later that afternoon so that all she could do was dismiss her entire response to it—to him—as an over-reaction, brought on by the emotional circumstances of the day.

The huge Hampstead house appeared to be deserted when Jade came downstairs the next morning, apart from the maid who served her breakfast, alone at the long polished table in the dining-room.

Where her brother was was anybody's guess. Rufus Napier, though, was in Paris on business and, brushing a few crumbs from the lap of her pink shellsuit, Jade opened the morning's post and, finding nothing that couldn't be handled by her father's personal secretary, took the letters into his study to await the other girl's arrival, just as the telephone rang on the desk.

'Jade? Are you all right?' Rufus Napier's autocratic voice came unusually anxiously from the French capital. Then, having gained her assurance that she was, he ignored her surprised enquiry for an update on the morning's mail. 'Look, I don't want to alarm you,' he said, when the business side of things was completed, 'but I've had kidnap threats during the past couple of days— with you as the target. I'm leaving strict instructions therefore that you're not to go out—anywhere—without someone else going with you. Is that clear?' Kidnap threats? Jade swallowed, her skin crawling while she tried to grasp what he had said about a chaperon.

'Oh, Dad! Like who?' she contested when she had recovered from the initial chilling impact of his news, because, quite simply, there wasn't anyone—only Henry, the family chauffeur, and he was in his late sixties and really not that suitable a candidate to offer any real protection, she thought with a grimace. Besides, there had been kidnap threats once before—years ago, in her first year at university, and they had turned out to be a hoax. Calmly now she reminded him of both these facts. 'Anyway, I don't want to have to ask Henry or one of the maids to come with me every time I want to go-' she tried to continue in protest, but her father's voice cut in.

'You'll do as you're told!' Wincing, she could visualise him clearly at the other end of the line, red-faced and angry, giving no quarter as usual. 'While you're still my daughter and living under my roof you'll behave exactly as I say. I'm hiring a bodyguard for you,' he went on, controlling her life, she thought with poignant emotion, as he controlled everything under the huge umbrella of his empire—his management, his staff, his associates, even the man she had wanted to marry. 'Someone trained in tip-top security who'll keep you away from unwise situations...'

'Dad! I don't *need* a bodyguard,' Jade opposed, feeling that Rufus Napier was being unduly overcautious, holding the phone inches from her ear to avoid being deafened by his angry bellowing at the same time as a voice from the doorway drawled,

'I'm afraid you've already got one.'

Startled, Jade swung round, her black hair cascading over shell-pink nylon, her shocked eyes recognising the man to whom she had been talking at that wedding the previous day, leaning idly—arms folded—against the door-jamb.

'You!' In total confusion she let the receiver clatter back on to its rest, her stunned exclamation answered by the briefest of nods as he straightened, moving with a lithe, casual ease into the study.

'Kent Solomon.'

She didn't take the hand he calmly extended, too shocked and embarrassed to do anything but stare up at those strongly defined features, seeing only mockery in the hard brilliance of his eyes, on that carved, derisive mouth. The fact that he was also wearing a tracksuit was evidence that he had obviously been briefed about her private tennis tuition on Wednesday mornings, but the loose, predominantly blue garment, coupled with the fact that she was wearing sports shoes and had therefore traded a few confident inches today, made his build and stature seem more imposing than ever.

'Why didn't you tell me you were working for my father?' she asked accusingly, feeling the sheer impact of his masculinity unsettling beyond words.

'I wasn't,' he said laconically, in that velvet-smooth voice. 'And yesterday I wasn't even sure I wanted the job.'

Jade's chin lifted, eyes glittering like cold sapphires, pink colour invading the pale translucency of her cheeks. 'What made you change your mind?'

The phone ringing made her jump, and distractedly she picked it up again.

'... the devil do you think you're doing cutting me off when I'm talking to you?'

With resigned docility, Jade took the verbal castigation being hurled down the line, her attempts to apologise drowned beneath a tide of

unreasoning paternal anger, exasperation turning to surprise as the receiver was taken easily from her tight, tense fingers.

'Solomon. It's all right—I startled her coming in.' With an unexpected authority he was explaining what she herself had been unable to, while Rufus Napier was evidently listening—and being placated. And with calculated dexterity! she marvelled, nevertheless resenting her unwelcome rescuer as she heard him uttering a brief parting comment in conclusion.

'I know you're being paid to protect me—but that doesn't mean from my own father!' she breathed, flabbergasted by his insolent command over what had, after all, been a private call.

His mouth curled with infuriating smugness, while against the far wall the elaborate antique grandfather clock slowly began to chime the hour. 'You didn't seem to be doing very well.'

Which was an understatement, she decided, knowing she should be grateful to him, but his undeserved treatment of her the day before stopped her from being civil.

'Nevertheless-' She broke off as he reached round her to place the phone back on its rest, suddenly too conscious of that potent masculinity—of the subtle, limey aftershave lotion he had used. Neither did it help remembering the overtures she had made to him yesterday—a member of her father's security staff—and one who didn't even like her to boot!

'Whenever you're ready...' With cool complaisance he was putting himself at her disposal, though behind that relaxed courtesy she sensed that there would be very little complaisant about him. 'Unless, of course, you won't be needing me until after you've attended to your more...' he hesitated, looking mockingly down at the post she was still clutching '... personal matters.'



His meaning was all too clear, and impatiently Jade tossed the letters down on to the desk behind her, anger glittering in her eyes as she swung to face him. 'No, I answer them all in person—one by one, and with exquisite attention to taste!' she flung at him, his opinion patently clear to her—like every cheap newspaper reporter's—that any man she was seen with was—or would at some time be—her lover, and there had been so many in tow over the past eighteen months. But she could never begin to explain that she kept them all at arm's length; that she wasn't interested in any of them either emotionally or sexually, and that apart from that artless surrender to Russ—for whom she'd been prepared to give up everything—her so-called 'romances' were just a facade—a sham—to pretend to the world that she didn't care. 'Then when I get bored...sometimes I might condescend to look in on how the business is doing— just for the fun of it!'

Her dark hair gleamed as she tossed a glance up at him, her nostrils flaring, her features tense from his totally unjustified antagonism. How dared he come in here and prejudice her when he didn't even know her? she fumed, refraining from informing him that she did work sometimes—and darn hard!—learning the ropes of business management, even if her own father didn't wholly regard her as a serious successor to his business. But if Kent Solomon had classed her as one of the idle rich, interested only in pleasure, his opinion based merely on the fictional scoops of prejudiced reporters, then who was she to disappoint him? Nor could she admit to herself then that it wasn't only his biased ideas about her which made her resent him so much, it was the way she'd made such an uncharacteristic play for him after that wedding the previous day—a thing she had never done with any man—only to be so shamefully and embarrassingly rejected by him, that made the whole situation so intolerable.

'I'll be ready in five minutes,' she conveyed to him, 'and I'll be taking the Porsche.' She was going to add by way of accommodation, 'If you'd rather wait for me out there, but didn't, attaching in a

deliberately superior tone that even made her cringe herself, 'Get it out of the garage for me, will you? You'll find the keys on the hall table next to the silver vase.'

The challenge in the steely grey of his eyes made her swallow, that lift of a brow a subtle warning to her that he wasn't the kind of man who took orders lightly from anyone.

Still, he was being paid to! she rationalised, to try and justify her untypically reproachable behaviour, feeling his gaze raking over the pink sheen of her suit with such unashamed insolence that she felt her cheeks start to flame, saw the cynical satisfaction on his lips as she swept past him out of the room.

He was waiting for her, arms folded, as she came out of the house into the sunshine, leaning with a confident lazy air against the gleaming silver metalwork of the Porsche.

'It suits you.' Though her statement was tinged with sarcasm, she meant it, wondering if he took jobs like this for the opportunities they could lead to, the people he could meet, the expensive cars he might have the use of, and was unable to help adding, 'And I'll bet you'd just love to drive it, wouldn't you?'

She was acting like a real rich bitch, she thought— but he'd precipitated her behaviour—catching the keys he dropped on to her open palm as he straightened and with that careless ease moved away from her door, pulling it open after him. And that was as far as his courtesy was going to extend, she was made to realise when she was left to close it herself, fixing her gaze challengingly on Kent as he came around the bonnet.

'That isn't the only thing I'd like to do.' His words grazed the air over the growl of the powerful engine as he climbed in beside her,

slamming his door, a snatched glance at him revealing a tight grimace to the carved line of his mouth.

'Would you mind explaining yourself?' she invited, but with a dryness in her throat as she put the car into gear—as it suddenly registered with her fully why he was there: because someone might possibly want to kidnap her, even to do her harm. Rigidly she kept her gaze on the narrow suburban road, considering, for the first time, just how safe she was with Kent Solomon—even how effective his unwanted guardianship might be.

'Some other time,' he drawled in response to her rather tremulous challenge. 'Your father's paying me for your protection, not for a detailed account of my personal opinion of his children.'

Jade's lips compressed as his words cut into her like whipcord. 'Feel better for that?' she retorted, wishing she was the type who could put her foot down and scare him witless, except that she didn't think very much would frighten Kent Solomon, and more importantly, she had never driven recklessly in her life. Which was why it had been so unjust, being blamed for that accident, she reflected with a stab of bitterness, earning the contempt of some of her friends, the media and the public—and the man who was sitting beside her now.

'What exactly are your qualifications?' she enquired, glancing in her rear-view mirror, unaware of how the severity of her hair—tied back in a pony tail—revealed every taut muscle of her face, the small, anxious crease between her eyes.

'What is this? A second interview?'

He sounded amused, and she darted a look at him, but there was no emotion at all in that granite-hewn face. However, her fears were subsiding a little in assuring herself that, wherever he had come from,

Rufus Napier would have had him vetted, double-checked and approved before he'd even stepped out of bed!

'No.' She turned the wheel, changing lanes to approach a busy junction, her indicator ticking rhythmically in the plush interior of the car. 'I just like to know what sort of man my father's hired, that's all.'

He laughed softly, a strangely warm sound that sent a small shiver of awareness across her skin. 'What sort do you prefer?' He was silent long enough to witness the colour that crept up into her face with the pin-pointed reminder of how obviously she had tried to make a play for him the previous day. Then, 'I've been through the Forced-spent most of my time with Special Branch, until I finally pulled out a few years ago. Nowadays I work for myself.'

'For whoever pays the most,' she assumed aloud, refusing to show any sign of being impressed.

'Something like that.' She shot him a swift, assessing glance, caught the lazy amusement in the directness of his and looked quickly away, realising that he had misinterpreted that tension in her when she heard him say, 'Don't worry. I'm more than experienced enough to deal with anything that might threaten your pretty head, believe me.'

She didn't need to be convinced. Resenting him though she did, her instincts nevertheless assured her that there wouldn't be any situation he couldn't handle, and with a small shiver she wondered absently if he carried a gun.

Having to be continually watched by him, though, irritated her, and during her tuition at the tennis club, though he kept his attendance very low-key, observing those around her with a shrewd yet subtle vigilance, so that no one would have guessed the exact nature of his work, Jade felt his presence as an uncomfortable intrusion into her

private life—a dark shadow eclipsing the normal bright spirit of the lesson.

'You've lost your usual spark this morning, Jade,' the middle-aged coach commented after his exhaustive attempts to improve her backhand proved futile. 'You're all at sixes and sevens today.'

Jade grimaced, stooping to pick up her sports bag. 'Just one of those mornings,' she responded with a wan smile, unable to divulge the reason for her lack of enthusiasm today.

Nor did it help to ease her frustration when, coming off court with her racket slung over her shoulder, she encountered Kent, appearing as if from nowhere to remark, 'I can certainly see why you think you need tuition. You're supposed to keep your eye on the ball, not on everything but.'

His amusement needling her, she looked up at those strikingly sculpted features, feeling that tug of familiarity—some elusive fragment of memory in the dark recesses of her mind.

'I know,' she said poignantly, too aware of him as he fell into step beside her just as a triumphant shout rang out behind them as someone scored a point on another court. 'But it's rather off-putting knowing there's someone watching every move I make.'

He grimaced at her pouting displeasure, his swift appraisal of her sweat-slicked arms and magnificently long legs beneath the short white tennis dress making her pulse leap in startling response.

'You'd better get used to it,' he said drily. 'Hold it!' They had come into the main club building—outside the ladies' shower-room. 'Is this the only door in and out of there?' he demanded to know, indicating towards it with a jerk of his chin.

'Yes, why?' That restraining hand on her bare arm caused her voice to falter, her throat contract. 'Oh, *no*,' she breathed, exasperated, as the reason for his asking dawned. 'Planning on following me in there as well?'

He didn't answer, but released her to push the door wide, sending a cursory glance towards the deserted curtained cubicles before motioning with his head for her to proceed.

'Thanks,' she said brittly, brushing past him with a tingling awareness of his proximity—and his strength too, since, -with one outstretched arm, he was holding open a door so fiercely sprung that it normally took both of hers to even move it. And, glancing over her shoulder, she uttered in a voice that was still surprisingly unsteady, 'I suppose it would be a rather superfluous exercise to say "Don't go away".'

She didn't wait for his response, glad of the door that was already closing behind her, granting her a few peaceful minutes to herself.

Jeremy was in when she arrived back at the house, relaxing in the Regency-styled splendour of the drawing- room.

'Like your keeper?' her brother taunted, easing his slim, casually clad frame up from an armchair to switch off a sleazy jazz number he had been listening to. He'd had a new haircut too, Jade noted, as he came back across the wide room, seeing the dark wave falling across those flagrantly handsome features that made every girl fall for him on sight. 'Big, isn't he?' he remarked in a way she knew conveyed both envy and dissatisfaction, besides letting her know that he had been watching from the window when she had driven in with Kent. 'As well as expensive.'

Identical blue eyes clashed, Jade's puzzled. 'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Just that I overheard Pater talking to him on the phone. Do you know how much he's paying that guy to look after you?' he invited her to guess, and when she shook her head delivered some phenomenal figure that made her eyebrows shoot up.

'What?' she breathed, shaken for a moment. What made any security guard worth that much?

'Father wanted him in particular. He knew him from way back-' it was almost as though Jeremy had read her mind '—and from the difficulty I could gather he was having with him over the phone I guessed this Solomon guy wasn't too keen on taking the job.'

No, he'd told her that himself, she remembered—and how, too, she had asked him what had changed his mind. Well, now she knew. The money! But that still didn't explain why her father was paying him such an exorbitant sum.

'Don't worry, Sis—you're worth it.' Her brother gave her an uncustomary squeeze, though awkwardly, Jade sensed, since Rufus Napier had never encouraged any outward displays of affection in either her or her brother. 'Anyway, you know Pater—he doesn't take anyone at face value, and apparently Kent was Uncle Silas's security man when he was in the Cabinet, so he knew what he'd be getting—the best.'

Which would explain why she thought she had seen him before, Jade mused, if he'd worked with her politician uncle, although she couldn't recall seeing that much of her late mother's brother—let alone his bodyguard—before he'd retired from his high office to live in Canada. It did, however, go some way to clarifying the reason for her father's generosity, because Jeremy was right: their father had no real faith in anyone. Probably, she thought, because he had had to claw his way out of a deprived childhood and adolescence to create the empire over which he presided now, and one didn't get to be a millionaire at

twenty-four and go on to build a multi-million-pound conglomerate without meeting a lot of unscrupulous people along the way. She just wished he hadn't singled out Kent Solomon from among them, that was all.

'Don't fret. You'll get used to having a chaperon.' Jeremy must have seen the discontentment in her face, reminding her, in not so many words, that, as the primary heir to the Napier fortune, his own security man had become like his shadow for the past eighteen months. Ever since the morning after that ill-fated party... 'You can even wind up buddies after a while.' Jade came out of her unwelcome reverie to catch her brother's glib comment.

'No, thank you,' she said stiffly, unable ever to visualise a time when she might find herself on a social footing with Kent.

An eyebrow lifted, black against skin that was almost as fair as her own. 'Not the approachable type?' He shrugged. 'Oh, well, perhaps Father picked him initially for that inaccessible quality, although-' He broke off, looking unusually embarrassed.

'Although what?' Suspicion coloured Jade's voice, but her brother merely shook his head.

'Nothing, Sis—keep your hair on. I was only intimating that... well... he does look like a man who isn't exactly unschooled in the ways of women—and you know what the papers say about Jade Napier.'

Jade smiled humourlessly, the forced little gesture concealing the bitter scars she kept hidden from the world. Yes, she knew very well. But it was wrong of Jeremy to remind her of that, because he knew how the media could blow things up out of all proportion—get things entirely wrong. He knew, better than anyone...

'Just make sure *you* stay out of them,' she advised in an attempt to draw the subject away from herself and feeling, as she so often did,



years older than her brother, though he was in fact only sixteen months her junior. The truth was, though, that he'd been spoilt, it hurt to admit to herself—while she had been pushed aside, she'd felt, ever since she was a child—at times even ignored. And it wasn't only through her father's own admission to wanting a son above everything, or through her mother's untimely death shortly after Jeremy was born—although that couldn't have helped—but she had never been close to Rufus Napier, being packed off to boarding-school before she had even turned eight. Then when she'd been growing up, turning into a woman, with more than a decent attraction—as he called it—for the opposite sex, he hadn't known what to do with her, becoming possessive to the point of obsession, having every man she brought home vetted like some criminal unworthy of his daughter—though he hadn't shown her a glimmer of affection himself, ruining her relationships and eventually her chances of happiness with Russ McKenzie. And if Kent Solomon could push her aside too—reject her like some worthless little tramp—then heaven help her! She didn't have to like him either! But oh, boy, if he thought he was going to have an easy ride as her bodyguard, was she going to make him work for his money!

## CHAPTER TWO

JADE put her plan into definite action the following day.

With her father still in Paris and Henry and the Rolls, therefore, at her disposal, she had the chauffeur drive them up to the West End, deciding that shopping for a new summer wardrobe would be a good way of warming Kent up.

'Don't hang around. We'll get a taxi back,' she told the white-haired Henry, who had been with the Napier household as long as she could remember. 'You know me,' she reminded him with a smile. 'Once I start buying, I can't stop-' which was a slight exaggeration purely for Kent's benefit '—so I can't imagine we'll be leaving very much before five.'

And it was only nine-thirty now, she thought with a small tug of satisfaction when Kent glanced at his watch and enquired with barely concealed disbelief, 'What time did you say?'

She gave him a demure smile as the purr of the departing Rolls was lost in the roar of the morning traffic. 'What's the matter, Kent? Don't you like shopping?'

A breeze from an alleyway between the eternal shops ruffled the tawny hair. 'No more than the next man,' he commented drily, that grimace saying it all.

'Sorry!' She had to shout above the noise of a dusty red double-decker bus groaning away from some changing lights. 'I didn't realise...'

The look he gave her held a glimmer of challenge, and" quickly she assumed an interest in a window and some shoes she would rather have gone barefooted than been seen in, because she had the strongest suspicion that he knew exactly what she was up to.

A trek around the shoe-shops, however, seemed like a good way to start, and she made sure she left none unexplored, relishing the satisfaction of seeing Kent lingering outside, just a window-shopper to anyone passing, those powerfully honed senses concealed behind a totally relaxed air.

With the purchase of a pair of Indian sandals, she then spent nearly an hour in her favourite bookshop browsing through the new titles with more than deliberate preoccupation, the stray glances she sent Kent—likewise outwardly absorbed in another section of the shop—revealing that he looked anything but bored. In fact, at one point he appeared to be having a very lengthy discussion with the shop's manager, Jade was more than a little surprised to notice, particularly as he seemed to have completely forgotten she was there. Well, would this be a good test of his abilities!

Abandoning the book she had been fully intending to buy, she took her opportunity and made a quick exit, darting off into the cavalcade of shoppers and tourists along the West End street.

She didn't want him continually watching—following—judging her! If she had to have a bodyguard then let it be someone else—anyone but Kent Solomon. For a start, he disturbed her far too much. And if she telephoned her father and said she'd lost him in the crowd—then, highly recommended as he'd come, he wouldn't last two more minutes on Rufus Napier's payroll! Apart from the fact that she hadn't ruled out the possibility that this whole scare wasn't just a ploy of her father's to have her watched...

"Trying to give me the slip?"

Kent's voice behind her made her jump and she exhaled a small sigh as he caught up with her. 'Can anyone do that?'

His mouth drew down at her tetchy remark and he made way for someone to pass between them, moving back to her again. 'No.'

No. And she should have known better than to have tried, she thought defeatedly, shuddering from the hard resolve in his reply.

'If you're trying to get me fired, Jade, then forget it,' he recommended, steering her out of the path of two teenagers rushing past them for a bus.

For a moment he was too close, that limey scent of him impinging on her senses so that quickly she pulled free, her heart hammering absurdly. 'Why should I want to do that?'

He made no comment, the subtle gold of his watch catching the sunlight as he pushed back his shirt-cuff, saying, 'It's lunchtime. If I may make the suggestion that we go somewhere and have a bite to eat...'

Of course. He had to be hungry, she thought, because she was. But it was worth going without a snack today just to make him suffer a little as recompense for his prejudiced opinions about her, she thought—her pride irreparable as, impetuously, she uttered, 'Lunch? I'm far too busy for that.'

Was that dismay she read behind the cool mask of his features? His emotions were too cleverly concealed to tell.

'I've got too much shopping to do today,' she prevaricated, heading towards an exclusive boutique with a victorious little feeling that he could do nothing but follow her, and once inside she examined every item displayed, emerging with one tiny bag—a sleeveless designer top—to show for her efforts, and a deliberately smiled, 'I wasn't too long, was I?'

She knew she was acting insufferably, egged on by her wounded pride.

'Why ever should you entertain that idea?' His blazing smile did nothing to warm the cool grey eyes; nevertheless Jade's blood raced.

If he ever smiled like that at a woman and meant it, she would be utterly smitten! she thought, responding only with a careless little shrug, 'Only because so many of you men complain.' And make of that what you will! she thought with a galling reminder of just what he believed about her so that her conscience was eased as she treated him to a similar wait outside several more shops, guessing that he had to be dying from boredom by now, if nothing else.

Surprisingly, though, he appeared remarkably untarnished and certainly none the worse for missing a meal, while she was beginning to feel decidedly weary, and her stomach was making funny little grumbling noises, craving the sustenance it had been denied.

Still, that wasn't going to keep her from her *coup de grace*, she determined, gritting her teeth against her own discomfort as she made for her favourite store.

'What the...?' She winced from Kent's coarse invective as they came out of the lift, guessing with a small slice of pleasure that a long, embarrassing wait in the lingerie department wasn't something he relished at all.

'I need a new bikini,' she said nonchalantly, pretending she hadn't heard, 'but at least you've got something better to look at now,' and without waiting for his reply she shot off in the direction of the swimwear, leaving him standing there among the rails of satin and wispy lace.

Having made her selection, she peered through a chink in the fitting-room curtain. She could see Kent, hands in his pockets,

hovering uncertainly between the half- slips and a rail of very exclusive briefs.

Good, she thought as she tried on another bikini, guessing, with a bittersweet satisfaction, how uncomfortable he must be feeling. Peering out again, she could see that he was still in the same area. A young woman browsing through the slips glanced in his direction a couple of times before he looked her way, and when he did flashed him such a brilliant smile that Jade felt a surge of hot emotion race through her, particularly when Kent responded, his expression half-indulgent, half-amused.

Why couldn't he look awkward as any other man would? she fumed inwardly, because, for all her efforts to embarrass him, she had to admit that he looked frustratingly unperturbed. Well, would she soon change that! she decided, as, almost on cue, behind the curtain, the assistant was asking her if she wanted anything else passed in.

'No, I've made up my mind now, thank you,' Jade returned, grimacing at herself, wondering what the woman must think of her deliberately protracted attempts to select a bikini, because normally she would have been in and out again in five minutes. Calmly, though, furthering her plan, she said, 'Do you think you could ask my boyfriend to come over here, please? He's standing over there by the slips.'

'Oh, the dishy one,' the voice commented with a distinct note of envy. Then, 'Certainly, madam,' followed by the sound of retreating footsteps while Jade considered her reflection in the long mirror.

The bikini was black and scanty—scanty enough to make any man blush on sight—the satiny, pre-shaped bra, edged with gold braid, flattering her full, high breasts, while the braided belt of the briefs hung loosely to one side, the gold strands resting against one creamy thigh.

'You wanted me for something?'

Jade tensed as Kent spoke to her from the other side of the curtain, the sultry features looking back at her from the mirror taut with a nervous excitement that lent a bright glitter to her eyes.

'Yes.' With a boldness she was suddenly far from feeling, she whipped back the curtain and came out. 'What do you think?' she enquired in a voice dangerously close to shaking, seeing the shock in his eyes and then something else that darkened the grey around the glittering ebony of his pupils.

Slowly and deliberately his gaze tugged down over her body, its touch a tangible warmth over her breasts and waist and hips and the long, long legs, emphasised by the daring cut of the briefs—and his lips took on a decidedly mocking twist.

'The bikini's all right,' he drawled, his smile deriding her pink-cheeked embarrassment which his insolent examination had produced. 'But with a figure like that I'm surprised you're even considering something that skimpy.'

Jade's colour deepened, Kent's disparaging remark flaying raw into her already whipped pride. 'Sour grapes, Kent?' she uttered in a voice very close to trembling, her eyes guarded, her hair like a dark curtain against the pale sensuality of her skin.

He shrugged. 'I thought that maxim only applied to something that was... unobtainable.'

He couldn't have made his meaning clearer if he had tried, his unleashed criticism of her morals hurting her more than anything else he could have said, and, squaring her shoulders, the gesture unwittingly accentuating the upward thrust of her breasts, in bitter defence she flung back at him, 'Believe me, it does! Where you're

concerned, anyway!' And she knew, she thought, not caring, the connotations he would draw from that!

For a moment, from the set of that jaw, he looked as if he would have liked to rip the scanty two-piece from her body right there in the shop, just to prove her wrong. But then, his anger controlled, he gave a good imitation of a smile, his lips deriding again as he said phlegmatically, 'That wasn't the impression you gave me when we met on Tuesday.'

His cruel reminder stung, along with the shaming memory of his rejection. Cheeks scorched crimson, she exhaled a ragged, 'God! Just because a woman speaks to you it doesn't mean she-' She broke off, torn pride rendering her speechless, and, noticing the young assistant looking at them rather interestedly, swept back into the cubicle with a protesting jangle of brass curtain rings.

Good grief, who did the man think he was? Tears pricked against her eyelids as she pulled off the offending bikini, fatigue, frustration and a lack of nourishment all adding to his calculated endeavours to make her feel rotten. It didn't help, either, admitting that that was exactly what she had been trying to do all day to him. And yet he couldn't have meant all the things he'd said, she considered with a glance at her nubile nakedness in the long mirror. She wasn't immodest, but she knew she had a reasonable figure and with a sudden throb of her pulse she knew without a doubt, that when she had first come out of the cubicle—surprising him like that—there had been unmistakable desire in his eyes.

'Tired?' he enquired smugly when she collapsed, exhausted and hungry, against the back seat of the taxi, and she supposed she deserved it, but wouldn't give him the satisfaction of a response, keeping her eyes trained on the noisy rush-hour traffic around Marble Arch so that she wouldn't see the mocking triumph in his face.



Her father had given her strict instructions to stay away from the office, and after that day of discomfort she had planned for Kent which had backfired on her Jade was only too glad to spend the next couple of days at home.

He was there, of course, like a dark, obtrusive shadow, though he had his own suite upstairs and kept very much to it when he knew he wouldn't be needed, leaving her to relax alone in the grounds behind the house as the weather had suddenly turned exceedingly warm for May. It was with unexpected dismay, therefore, that she came out through the patio doors one morning and saw him sprawled there on a sun-lounger, feeling his gaze lift from the "newspaper he was reading to run disturbingly over the white one-piece swimsuit she wore under the gaping Chinese silk wrap.

'Very nice,' he drawled, 'but I didn't think you'd take me literally,' watching her as she tossed the wrap on to another lounger and padded barefoot over to the shimmering pool.

'Disappointed, Kent?' Her words were as barbed as the rose-bushes climbing the pergola beyond the manicured lawns. He was referring to the bikini she'd purchased but couldn't bring herself to put on, and she was glad now that she hadn't as the casual caress of his eyes sent a tingling warmth across her skin. 'Is that why you do this job? Because it pays well for doing next to nothing?' She sent a scathing glance back at him, unwittingly struck by the daunting fitness of that near-naked, muscle-packed physique. 'Or do you just get some kick out of seeing rich and privileged women without their clothes?'

Without giving him a chance to reply, she plunged headlong into the pool, the cool water a stinging shock as she surfaced, tossing her soaked hair out of her eyes to see Kent, face white with fury, twisting

away from his bed like a riled alligator, coming in after her with an ominous plunge.

'No!' Realising that this time she had goaded him too far, she started splashing away, but she didn't stand a chance against his powerful front crawl, and she let out a shriek as he grabbed her by the ankle, halting her progress and then, with a painful grip on her arm, dragged her, protesting fearfully, into shallower water—to the cold, curving marble of the steps.

'Now say that to me again!'

His eyes were blazing like twin fires, teeth clenched with a savage anger that was the least of her worries because he was lying almost on top of her and she could feel the pulsing anger of his hard body, feel its hair-coarsened warmth stirring a riotous excitement in her even while her shocked brain rejected it.

'Kent, don't. I...' She groaned from the hard edge of the step cutting into her back beneath the water, from the bruising tenacity of his fingers.

'Why not? You're always so ready with the smart remarks,' he rasped, his chest lifting heavily. 'So now let's see you talk your way out of this!'

With contemptuous ease he curtailed her efforts to twist out of his grasp, pinning her to the step, smothering her protest beneath the fierce, unyielding pressure of his mouth.

His kiss was punishing—and humiliating—but there was a cruel expertise in the way he coaxed her mouth to open to the hard demands of his, her heart thudding in her breast as suddenly he slid an arm under her to relieve her of the cold, thrusting stone beneath her back, drawing her hard against the startling sensuality of his body.

Oh, God, what was he doing to her? No man had ever kissed her like this! Not even Russ! Her mind screamed, struggling for its sanity, while her body responded to him with a shameless determination of its own. Eagerly her hands came up to clutch at his shoulders, and she strained towards him, burning with the sizzling impulses engendered by his warm, wet strength.

She was breathing raggedly as he tipped her back to gain access to the smooth column of her throat, his lips moving down across the creamy slope of her shoulder, insidiously gentle, holding her like some paralysed moth beneath its predator's silken embrace. But when he slipped the thin strap off her shoulder logic returned with a sudden panicky, 'No!'

Surprisingly, he stopped and lifted his head, the desire in his eyes somehow at variance with the mocking line of his mouth.

'Beautiful Jade.' His voice caressed like the cool water, and lying there, flushed and impassioned, with the peaks of her breasts thrusting against the soft swimsuit, betraying her, she saw a complexity of emotions cross his face and caught the wanting in his voice, even through the condemnation, as he breathed, 'How many men have had you here like this?'

She didn't need to be too experienced to realise how aroused he was, but shame at her own reaction to his kiss had her retorting tremblingly, 'I'll have you fired for this!'

He merely smiled at that, and ran a contemptible finger over the milky flesh he'd exposed above the now dangerously low line of her swimsuit. 'And I was under the impression you wanted to include me in your list of fawning suitors. Or did the attraction pale in finding out I was just a cheap security guard?'

A cool breeze played across her wet skin and she shivered, absently catching the sound of a mower starting up on the stretch of lawn behind the tennis court.

'Cheap? Hardly,' she sneered, remembering how much her brother had said Kent was being paid. When an eyebrow rose in querying disapproval, however, she said quickly, 'Jeremy—he overheard,' hoping he didn't think her father would be guilty of such an indiscretion. She looked at him obliquely. 'So what makes you worth that much, Kent?' She saw a shadow of indecision cross those hard-hewn features, watching rivulets running down his neck from the wet, tawny hair. But it was another voice that broke the silence, surprising them both with, 'Very cosy. I know I said you could become pals, Sis, but—well, that's fast work! Stick with it, Solomon. She could be worth millions some day.'

Wearing only his swimming-briefs, Jeremy was grinning down at them from the poolside, a slight, pale figure against Kent who, showing none of the embarrassment Jade was feeling, had moved calmly away from her and was now wading up the steps out of the pool.

'Not what you think, little brother,' he asserted with such cool dismissal of anything between them that Jade felt absurdly spurned.

'He's right—you're wrong,' she endorsed to Jeremy, as, still flushed and agitated, she followed Kent's example and got out of the pool.

'Aren't you staying with us?'

Other voices revealed the 'us' to mean another young man and two girls, also wearing swimwear, coming across the patio, the girls looking hungrily at Kent, who was just stooping to pick up a towel as they sauntered past.

'No, thanks,' Jade retorted, still smarting from those comments he'd made to Kent. Apart from which, she seldom got on with his friends—or he with hers.

With her wrap tied around her wet body, she ignored Kent and went back into the house, starting when she heard his voice behind her just as she was crossing the hall. 'You didn't stay out there long.'

'No,' she said, turning round. He was wearing a white towelling robe now that was gaping to the waist, the sight of that hair-roughened chest making her breath catch in her lungs from the memory of how a few moments ago... She forced the thought out of her mind, expressing with a mien of composure, 'I apologise for my brother.'

'Why?' A lazy smile curled his lips. 'For interrupting us?'

'You know what I meant.' A bright flush stole across her cheeks. She could still feel the angry warmth of him against her. 'He tends to be a bit tactless at times. I think it stems from his not having enough to do.' Because he couldn't stick at anything for any longer than a few months, she thought, as he'd already opted out of university and showed little interest in his father's business empire—although she didn't tell Kent that, substituting instead, 'For Jeremy, most of the time, life is just one big game.'

'The voice of wisdom?' From the mockery in his eyes she knew exactly what he was thinking. He held precisely the same view about her.

'Do you have some private opinions to express on the subject?' she contested fiercely, slicing a glance at him as, disconcertingly, he began to accompany her up the wide staircase.

'Yes,' he averred, taking her up on her challenge. 'I think it's a direct result of too much too soon—materially, that is—coupled with a lack of parental discipline ... and love.' His hesitation brought her gaze

skimming across to his, her fingers tightening on the brass banister. He was looking away, though, at the elaborate cornices and the walls hung with original paintings which had fetched priceless sums at art auctions all over Europe and he said, 'All the money in the world can't replace a parent's direct involvement in a child's upbringing.'

Jade tensed as though he had intruded into something that was much too personal. 'And you're an expert on the subject, I suppose?' She gave a tight little laugh. 'And exactly how many children do you have, *Dr Spock*?

He allowed her sarcasm to wash over him, saying quietly, 'One. I have an eight-year-old son.'

His totally unexpected reply threw her as they stopped outside her room. 'Then you're.. .married?' For some reason she hadn't even bothered to consider that he might be. So why this aching disappointment?

'Divorced, actually,' he relayed, breaking the small, oppressive silence, 'although I have custody of Piers.'

Oh, God, don't let it show—the relief! Jade prayed silently in the grip of a chilling self-censure for experiencing such a profound emotion over a man she didn't even like. Floundering, she had to change course, returning to their previous topic, and somewhat waveringly repeated, 'A lack of love and discipline? Are you intimating that that's what's wrong with me?'

Momentarily he regarded the riot of damp hair framing the pale, spirited features, the clinging pastel silk accentuating her generous curves. And he said simply, 'I don't know. Is it?'

The grey eyes met hers, so dark and perceptive that they seemed to reach right down into her soul, evoking a need in her so infinitely acute that she wanted to cry out her loneliness and her longing—the

years of bitter rejection—but not for a moment could she let Kent Soloifion realise that he had come pretty close to guessing the truth, and, fighting shy of his question, she tilted her chin to announce with feigned indifference, 'I shan't be needing you any more today, Kent. Take the rest of the day off.'

She opened her door, about to step into her room, but his towelling-clad arm came up across the aperture so that she had to take a swift step back to avoid touching him.

He could see through her too well, she thought with shuddering awareness of his body-warmth and that faint scent of chlorine that clung to his skin, of the penetrating intensity of his eyes that made her heart thunder in her breast as for one wild moment she wondered if he was going to kiss her again. But then he let his arm fall, allowing her access to her room, and the tense little episode was over.

Jade heard the tapping on her door just as she was stepping out of the shower, and, throwing on a robe, answered it to find Jeremy standing there.

'Er—are you alone?' Tentatively, it seemed, he glanced over her satin-clad shoulder. 'Can I come in?'

Jade stood aside to allow him entry. 'Of course. Why shouldn't I be?'

'Where's Kent?' he asked as she was closing the door.

'I gave him the rest of the day off.' She frowned, her expression turning to one of disbelief. 'You didn't really think he was in here, did you?' she exhaled with something nearing disdain. 'What you saw—'

'I know what I saw—and I know what I heard,' he remarked drily. 'There's something else you should know about that guy besides how much he's being paid for his very privileged protection.'

'Like what?' Jade demanded, her pulse suddenly throbbing from an ominous foreboding. 'Not something else you just *happened* to overhear?'

'I couldn't help it,' Jeremy was justifying. 'It was in the same telephone conversation. Apparently keeping you out of the hands of kidnappers wasn't the only thing Father had in mind when he was hired. I heard him telling Kent to see to it that you didn't get too involved with Juan Rodriguez-'

'How can he stop me?' Jade interrupted in angry exasperation. She had known Juan only a few months, it was true, having met the thirty-year-old Venezuelan property magnate when a friend had introduced them at one of her parties, and though she knew her feelings for the South American didn't extend to love she still objected to anyone trying to destroy her friendship with him.

'Precisely what Kent must have asked,' Jeremy was surmising, 'because Father boomed down the phone at him—and I quote—"If all else fails, bloody well seduce her yourself!"'

Jade stared at her brother. He couldn't! He wouldn't do a thing like that, she tried to reason, while another part of her knew that if it suited her father's purposes he most certainly would. And Rufus Napier disapproved of Juan Rodriguez almost as much as he'd disapproved of Russ! So was this talk of kidnapping just a ploy by her father to keep her closely watched? That kiss this morning in the pool a calculated act on Kent's part to try to seduce her? Somehow she doubted the latter. That kiss had been instigated purely by anger; she was at least able to realise that. Even so, like a weak, helpless fool she had responded to it—and he knew it—knew that she was totally



susceptible to him if he did decide to take that course of action to try and break up her relationship with Juan.

Well, let him try! she fumed silently, repressing tears of aching bitterness from her father's continuing disregard of her wishes to live her own life. She wouldn't play so easily into the man's hands next time. And that meant keeping out of his way—which was difficult, to say the least, when he was being paid to stick to her like a limpet! she thought disparagingly, expressing her exasperation the following week when Henry drove them to the West End hotel where she was meeting Roberta for tea.

'Can't you go off and see a show or something?' she complained to Kent as a green-liveried footman came hurrying across the pavement to open her door.

'No.' His answer was firm and concise as he stepped out of the Rolls behind her. 'Don't imagine I'm enjoying this,' he said when they were through the revolving door, 'any more than you are. What are you worried about anyway? That someone might see us and mistake me for one of your lovers?'

Beneath the chic blue silk dress Jade felt a shuddering tingle run down her spine. 'How could they?' she retorted, staring ahead at the pink and green decor of the palm court they were entering. 'As you pointed out, you're so much *older* than I am.' This with deliberate emphasis. 'No one would imagine for a moment that you'd really be my type.'

'Ah, but we know differently, don't we?' he murmured behind her.

Jade tensed, shame surfacing, but was unable to answer because a young frock-tailed waiter—obviously new and unacquainted with her regular visits there—had" come across and was asking their name.

'We aren't together,' she snapped a little too vehemently, instantly regretting sounding so short with the younger man as she gave hers and left Kent standing there, aware from the prickly feeling down her back that he was still watching her as she was led to the table where Roberta was waiting.

'You look ravishing!' the other girl commented, there in London to buy furnishings for her new home—and looking softly tanned, too, after her eight-day honeymoon in Venice, Jade noted fondly, as her friend asked, 'What have you been doing for the past week?'

Jade simply shrugged, murmuring, 'The usual,' thanking the waiter who was repositioning her chair. She didn't want to tell Roberta about the suspicious kidnap threats—or that her life had been well and truly turned upside-down by the likes of a man called Kent and that she'd deliberately avoided going anywhere in particular over the past week so as not to feel so chained to her unwelcome and disturbing chaperon.

She was relieved, therefore, when her friend turned the conversation to the boundlessness of newly-wedded bliss, pushing Jade's private troubles to the back of her mind until Roberta suddenly exclaimed, 'There's that man! What a coincidence? You know, the one who was at the wedding! He's here—at that table over there!'

Heart sinking, Jade glanced past the fronds of a luxuriant palm to the table near the far wall. He was sitting alone, reading a newspaper over the leisurely tea he had ordered, his broad shoulders sleek beneath the quality cut of his jacket, that relaxed poise unable to belie the acuteness of mind and body, the whipcord strength behind the lithe economy of his movements.

'That's no coincidence, Roberta,' she sighed over the soft strains of a piano drifting down to them through the green balustrade of the

balcony that ran along three sides of the room. 'He's a bodyguard Father hired for me,' and briefly she went on to explain why.

'Oh, you poor thing. That's what comes of being so famous,' Roberta sympathised, setting the fine china teapot down on the white cloth. 'What a stupendously attractive man to have around you, though! I wouldn't mind him guarding my body any day of the week!'

'You would—if he despised you for what you were, Roberta.'

Damn! Why had she sounded as if it mattered? Jade chided herself, seeing through the twist of steam from her teacup the sympathy in her friend's eyes, and knowing why. Too vulnerable to disclose the truth even to Roberta eighteen months ago, she guessed that her friend probably believed most of the gossip the columnists wrote about her. Believed the boyfriends who would never openly deny that they had made it with Jade Napier, too proud to admit to being granted nothing more than a suffered goodnight kiss. And, of course, the impeccable Roberta was excited by having such an infamous friend rather than appalled by it, Jade realised with a sigh.

'Now there's someone he doesn't despise! Who is that?'

Jade's gasp was drowned by the acoustics of the high-ceilinged room—by the piano solo and the echoing ring of crockery. The woman who had just brought Kent to his feet must have been in her early thirties, with blonde shoulder-length hair lying loosely against the jacket of a very stylish cream suit. But from the way she was looking up at him, so radiantly, as he kissed her cheek, pulled out her chair, it was evident to Jade that this was no casual meeting.

'I don't know,' she murmured with feigned indifference, glancing away with a sudden sharp twinge below her ribs. Clearly, he'd made a note of her itinerary for the week and invited his girlfriend to join him there that afternoon.

Suddenly the delicate pastries tasted like sawdust as she willed herself to look at Roberta; at the frescoes adorning the pink walls above the balcony; at the pianist—anywhere but at the two at that table so obviously absorbed in each other's company—until suddenly she had an idea. If she left now, then Kent would have to leave too, wouldn't he?

Adrenalin pumped through her, making her ignore an inner little voice that told her she was being unreasonable. If he had any ideas on breaking up her friendship with Juan, then she'd see to it that his didn't run too smoothly either!

'Could you telephone my chauffeur to come and pick me up right away?' With a smile adding charm to a wealth-inspired confidence, she slipped the waiter a generous tip with the number of the car phone, knowing that Henry would be waiting near by and would be round in minutes.

'Jade! How could you?' the other girl—realising—breathed, grabbing the various bags beside her chair as her friend insisted on settling both halves of the bill and got up.

Very easily, Jade thought with a sick satisfaction as she saw Kent summoning his own waiter, clearly aware of what was happening.

'Jade.' His deep voice beckoned as she would have walked out without sparing him a glance, and stiffly, with Roberta in tow, somehow she made it over to his table.

'Jade, meet Karen Williams. Karen...' With superlative courtesy Kent had risen and was introducing his companion to both girls, and Jade felt cool blue eyes studying her with smiling suspicion before they turned adoringly back to Kent.

'I thought you said you were working, darling?'

There was a definite reproof behind the glittering smile that drew only a smooth, 'Oh, but I am,' from Kent.

'Of course I should have recognised you as soon as I saw you,' Karen was addressing Jade, 'but you're so much taller than I imagined you'd be from your photographs.' This with a deliberate survey of her height as if it were something to be sympathised over, Jade thought, nettled. 'I've read so much about you, though, I feel I know you *very* well.' And she believed every word she'd read, that adverse emphasis conveyed as, completely ignoring Roberta, the woman glanced back at Kent, breathing, 'Really, darling... if you want to get your name in the papers then this is the one sure way of kicking up publicity.'

'Let me worry about that, Karen.' Though Kent's voice was toneless, it seemed almost to be defending her, Jade felt, with a sudden, absurd warmth trickling through her blood.

'Of course.' Rebuked, the woman was all smiles now. 'No one can handle things better than you do. But don't forget what you promised me, Kent—or our little trip to the States next month. Or are you likely to be putting that off now in favour of full-time baby-sitting?'

She laughed, a little forced laugh that didn't fool Jade, even if it had managed to fool Kent—which she doubted. The woman was crazy about him, anyone could see that; it was evident from the way she looked at him—and from that totally bitchy attitude towards *her*, Jade thought with angry colour creeping up her throat into her cheeks.

'Oh, yes. He's very good at it.' Before she could stop herself the words were tumbling from her lips. 'He's the best child psychologist around! But when it comes to bedtime stories, however, there isn't one he's told me I don't already know.'

Behind her she heard her friend's small shocked gasp- heard Roberta briefly excusing herself before she scuttled quickly away. Didn't

Roberta realise that when one didn't have a reputation to protect one didn't have anything to lose? she thought with poignant bitterness, seeing the same shock mirrored in the other woman's eyes. But it was the dark anger graven across Kent's face that made her realise chillingly that this time she'd really overstepped the mark.

'I'll be in touch,' he muttered with tight-lipped grimness to Karen, tossing some notes down on to the bill the waiter had delivered on a saucer before hustling Jade out to where Henry was waiting with the Rolls.

'What the devil were you trying to do?' Kent had waited until the car was in motion before laying into her with a thorough admonishing. 'Isn't it enough living with wharthe gossip columnists say about you, without openly bragging about your moral behaviour first hand? For goodness' sake! Where's your self-respect? Or don't you have *any*?' he challenged as the car purred slowly through the congested city.

Feeling unaccountably ashamed, Jade stared out of her window, glad that the sliding glass partition between them and Henry was closed so that the chauffeur wouldn't hear what was being said.

Was he really concerned about her reputation? Or just what damage she might have done to his love-life? That was probably nearer the truth, she thought, longing to tell him that she had had self-respect once, before it had been strangled and torn to pieces by circumstances, by a father whose only interest was to protect his son's reputation over everything else, and by the betrayal of the one man she had ever loved—or thought she had. But that would have been like admitting defeat—vulnerability—to her persecutors, and she would never, never do that. So she murmured flatly, 'She deserved it. If they'd had saucers of cream on the menu she'd probably have felt more at home!'

'Perhaps she did.' Surprisingly Kent was agreeing, even if he was ignoring her implication that Karen Williams was a malicious little cat. 'Nevertheless, a woman with all you've got—and I don't mean money,' he interjected roughly, 'shouldn't find it necessary to have to stoop to the same level.'

'So I'm a woman now, am I?' she returned with a provocative smile, warmed by that subtle and unexpected compliment from him. Then, 'What was she? Another spoilt, idle rich bitch you were lucky enough to find yourself looking after?'

She knew she was being extraordinarily catty herself— overreacting to Karen Williams' attitude towards her— and wasn't sure why, or even why she felt a sudden twisting inside when Kent responded in her defence, 'Karen isn't idle, or particularly rich. And yes, I look after her,' he extended in a matter-of-fact tone then. 'But not in the way you mean.'

Meaning what? Jade wondered, experiencing another sharp twinge—a let-down like she'd felt the other day when he had told her he was married, only now it was worse because if he had been she would have pulled the reins on this devastating attraction to him—but she hadn't, and something like intuition warned her that if she became involved with this man, left her emotions open to him in any way, she would know pain greater than any she had known yet, because she understood exactly what he had meant.

## CHAPTER THREE

JADE was practising her tennis with her father's personal secretary the following morning, her dissatisfaction over winning another game too easily increasing two-fold as she turned and saw Kent watching from behind the wire fencing.

'Would I like a partner like that!' the other girl expressed, joining Jade on her side of the hard court. 'But unfortunately duty calls.' She sent a drooling smile up at Kent who, with flawless courtesy, stood aside to let her through the gate before coming through himself on to the court.

'You need someone who can stretch you a bit more,' he remarked, when the other girl was out of earshot. And, stooping to pick up the spare racket on the bench, 'Mind if I give you a game?'

'No, of course not.' Uneasy, Jade watched him slip off his track-suit-top, wishing she could have refused. But if she had he would have guessed how much he disturbed her, she realised, her gaze drawn unwittingly to the movement of muscle beneath the white T-shirt, to those bare forearms feathered with tawny hair. And anyway, she did need some hard competition, and he'd probably be able to give her that—and more.

She was right. 'I think I liked you better when you were letting me think I could beat you!' Her breathless laughter rang out across the court and the still, warm morning after a dash to try and reach another driving volley she hadn't a cat in hell's chance of hitting back.

'Had enough?' he grinned, stepping lithely over the net to where she stood, having discarded her racket, towelling her damp face and arms.

'I'm no masochist!' she breathed, tired but surprisingly invigorated, and with a tentative glance in his direction, 'Thanks.'



'My pleasure.'

His blazing smile quickened her already stimulated blood and she looked quickly away, her nostrils flaring with the scent of his sweat-dampened skin.

'All part of the job?' Tension gave an edge to her words—apparent even above the trilling of a sparrow in the honeysuckle along the top of the boundary wall behind the court—and she heard the hard, impatient breath Kent inhaled.

'Kidnapping's no joke, Jade,' he said soberly, laying his own racket down with a small dull clack on top of hers. 'It's a serious business, and my job is to see that it doesn't happen, one way or the other. Personally, I'd prefer it if we could maintain your safety in a friendly and reasonable atmosphere—that way I think you'd agree that it'll be a hell of a lot easier on both of us. If you don't...' he stooped to retrieve his tracksuit-top, shrugging casually into it '...you'd better know now that I've wrestled with a darn sight tougher characters than you—and won.'

She could believe it! She swallowed, her gaze skittering over the broad shoulders beneath the corded strength of his throat, down over the tapering waist and hips to his long legs. He was every inch the hard-bitten vigilante, the trained authority—mind and body superbly tuned to outwit and outmanoeuvre in the dangerous human jungle for which he'd been primed.

'Am I supposed to tremble in fear?' she challenged, watching him gather up the rackets, but on a note of teasing, and one to which he was quick to respond.

'Not in fear, Jade, surely?'

It was a quietly sensual taunt as they were coming off the court and, tensing, Jade sucked in her breath. No, he'd clearly recognised the

desire in her when he'd kissed her in the pool that day, she remembered uneasily, wondering, as she'd been wondering ever since, what the woman he'd married had been like, who had divorced who, what had happened to split them up.

'I thought you weren't interested,' she threw back shakily over her shoulder as he stood aside to let her precede him through the gate, her stomach muscles contracting as she realised the way this conversation with him was leading.

'Oh, I'm interested,' she was startled to hear him say, those grey eyes sweeping over her with such shocking appraisal that she felt that treacherous chemistry flare and pulse into life. 'What man wouldn't be? But having an affair right now with you, little girl, is one complication I can easily do without.'

His words cut through Jade like serrated steel. An affair? Was that all he thought she was worthy of? Pain tautened her features as they approached the pergola. She already knew the answer to that. An anguish as sharp as the thorns among the budding roses over the rustic structure slowed her steps. If he was being paid to seduce her, then she would control the shots, she thought bitterly, some reckless rebellion prompting her to murmur, 'How easily, Kent?' He stopped dead, his face drawn with a harshness that made him look like a granite statue, making her heart thunder in her breast. But then suddenly he was tossing the rackets down and, with one purposeful stride, pulled her roughly into his arms.

The earth seemed to tilt as he dragged her against him, tugging her head back by the thick ponytail to expose her mouth to his. Only he didn't kiss her. His lips were but a hair's breadth from hers, his breath warm and stirring on her skin, those hooded grey eyes fixed on her trembling mouth, aware of the dizzying heat rushing through her blood, the desire that rocked her, leaving her weak and helpless, craving his kiss.

She murmured a soft sound—wanting as she'd never wanted anything! But suddenly he thrust her from him, and so forcefully that she almost stumbled against the twisted framework of the pergola, the drone of a lazy bee muffled by the pounding in her ears.

'Does that answer your question?' He spoke with almost brutish calm. Clearly he didn't want to get involved, whatever her father had demanded, his cool imperviousness towards her almost impossible to bear. If she felt such an attraction to him, then surely it had to be mutual? she agonised, her eyes darkened by desire and tortured disappointment as she murmured in soft appeal to him, 'Kent...'

'No.-' He was viewing her with a grim determination. 'Lesson's over for today, Jade—that includes the human biology. Or are you offering me that lovely body to advance my own education? Because if you are, young lady, you're-asking for a good old-fashioned caning.'

Humiliation unimaginable washed over her. Aching with rejection, she made to dart away, too hurt to notice the loose branch of the rose-bush that was hanging from its frame, and she gave a small cry as the thorns snagged the cap-sleeve of her dress, tearing viciously into her arm.

'Hell!' She would have ignored the pain—and Kent's coarse imprecation—if he hadn't caught her wrist, holding her there to inspect the damage.

'I'm all right...' She couldn't bear the gentleness of his touch after the cruelty of his rebuff, closing her eyes against it as he took a crisp, clean handkerchief out of his pocket and began dabbing carefully at the wound.

'There. Just make sure you bathe it properly as soon as you're back inside.' The handkerchief he repocketed was stained with pin pricks of blood, startling red against the white.

'Thanks.' But he still hadn't let her go, and his nearness was sending little *frissons* through her body.

He smiled. 'I seem to be having more than my fair share of your gratitude this morning,' he remarked, but with an inflection in his voice that made her glance quickly up at him.

Amazingly, touching her like that had affected him as that prior, calculated embrace had failed to, her mind registering the constraint in the tight contours of his face, the desire—quickly veiled—as he gazed down into the yearning bleakness of hers.

'One day, Jade,' he said softly, his thumb caressing the sensitive underside of her arm, 'some man's going to take far more than you're intending to give, and it's going to hurt—with a capital H. A girl in your position's too vulnerable to be as indiscriminate as you think you can be. It's an unscrupulous world out there, with a lot of unscrupulous characters in it, and sooner or later you're going to fall prey to one of them.'

'Like Juan Rodriguez?' Determinedly, Jade shrugged off his hand, bringing up the other man's name as a shield against her dangerous attraction for Kent, unable to tell him that it was all an act because she *had* been hurt—and bitterly; that sometimes she felt she would rather have been poor than face the disloyalty, lies and over-protectiveness that being an heiress to millions had brought, adding simply, 'Isn't he one of the reasons why you were hired?'

An eyebrow arched then fell as he guessed the source of her information. 'Your father doesn't trust him,' he stated in phlegmatic tones.

'My father doesn't trust anyone,' Jade emphasised, moving away, hurting from more than just the soreness of her scratches. But of

course, she thought, that wasn't strictly true. He trusted Kent Solomon.

'Your father doesn't approve of him.' With one effortless movement he had scooped up the rackets, falling into step with her across the vast lawn. 'And from what little I've seen of that smooth-talking South American, I can't say I blame him.'

Jade's lips tightened, while it dawned that he must have known of Juan through the media's interest in the man's various property developments. 'You don't know anything about him!' she snapped, resenting the disparaging way in which he had referred to Juan—even if her feelings for him didn't run to love. 'At least he's one man who's interested in me—for me—and not just because he's after my money!' She didn't realise she sounded so bitter until she felt the keen glance Kent sliced at her, those danger-honed senses so acute that she feared he might easily guess the truth. 'Anyway,' she continued, striving to keep her voice lighter, 'didn't you ever do anything your father didn't approve of?'

'Frequently,' he responded with glaring honesty, 'but never anything which I knew myself wouldn't be any good for me—just out of sheer determination to rebel.'

Jade curbed an instant retort as they came past the pool, across the patio to the house. Was she only seeing Juan because her father didn't approve of him? To rebel in some way for the way he had destroyed her relationship with Russ? True, she could never visualise herself falling head over heels for the Venezuelan, and she certainly didn't feel any strong sexual attraction to him—not like this spellbinding attraction she'd felt for Kent from the beginning. So was it simply rebellion, or just that she was safe with Juan Rodriguez—safe from fortune-hunters—safe from falling in love?

She didn't like the way being with Kent was forcing her to examine her motives for everything she did of late, and in a determined bid to show herself that she wasn't bothered by it she called Juan and arranged to see him the very next day.

'Juan's been working day and night for weeks,' she informed Kent after she had parked the car the following morning and they were making their way through the luxurious corridors of Rodriguez Enterprises. 'He's working on the second phase of that development on the Thames. Consequently, that's why I haven't seen much of him,' she appended, keen to let Kent think that it wasn't through any lack of interest on her part.

'Quite a workaholic,' was his dry, rather derogatory comment which she didn't get chance to respond to because they had reached the executive suite at the top of the building where its owner, clearly having seeing her drive in, was already opening the door.

'Hello, Juan,' she greeted the raven-haired man as he kissed both her cheeks in a Latin flourish of affection. And to Kent, 'Now that you've insisted on seeing me safely to the door, would you mind waiting in the car?' His only response to her aggravated order was a narrowing of grey eyes as they shifted from her to Juan.

'What are you imagining, Senor Solomon, that I'm in the market for kidnapping Jade?' He'd sounded shocked when she'd told him about the threats—that weren't yet public knowledge—over the phone the previous day, but now amusement played beneath Juan's neat, ebony moustache, laced the heavily accented voice. 'Unless, of course, you do not want her to be alone with me because you have very definite... what's the word... designs... on her yourself?'

'Juan!' Blushing, Jade looked quickly at Kent to see if he showed any unease in the light of that remark, but there was none.

'It wouldn't be the first time a boyfriend's been at the centre of a big fat ransom demand,' was all he responded with, then with infuriating collectedness, 'Or even a fiancée.'

An indignant flush showed itself across Juan's dark features. 'I've got enough money of my own—heaven's above! What would I want with hers?'

Beneath the light open-necked shirt, Kent's shoulder lifted. 'You tell me,' he invited laconically, but he went, leaving Jade biting her lip in angry frustration.

'I'm sorry, Juan...' She offered an apologetic shrug, bringing dark glinting eyes unwittingly to the exclusive red silk of her suit. She felt his arm go around her, steering her into the plush office beyond.

'Forget it, my love. He's employed to suspect everyone,' he consoled, smiling that tooth-gleaming smile. 'I want to talk about us. About this trip to Caracas and whether you've decided to stop refusing to come...' his hand went to his heart '.. and put a poor millionaire out of his misery.'

Jade laughed, but there was a crease between her eyes as she pulled gently away from him.

'Juan, I...' She let her sentence trail away, wishing that he'd stop asking her—take no for an answer. She didn't want to hurt his feelings, but she knew that to go away with him, for however short a time, might lead him to believe her own feelings for him were far more serious than they were. 'You know I like you, but... but there are things I want to do before I get too seriously involved with anyone. Like build some sort of career-'

'What on earth for?' It might have been her father talking, dismissing her capabilities. 'You don't *need* to,' Juan stressed with rather single-minded male reasoning. 'Doesn't Daddy provide an adequate

allowance for you? As I want to provide for you—as a man should provide for the woman he loves. Where is the girl the newsmen call capricious and fun-loving? All I get from you these days,' he groaned, with a circular motion of his finger towards his own clever Latin head, 'is bees-nez, bees- nez, bees-nez!'

Jade laughed again, taking his attitude lightly. 'Poor Juan,' she sympathised. 'Afraid of a bit of female competition?'

Still, whether he was or not, she thought afterwards, he nevertheless wanted to discuss his latest development scheme with her, so that it was almost two hours later that she came down to the car, sliding in to see Kent slipping a notepad and pen into his trouser pocket.

'Been doodling, Kent?' she enquired, feeling oddly guilty about keeping him out there so long, despite her careless tone.

Seemingly unperturbed, he calmly snapped his seatbelt into place, saying nothing as she started the car and pulled away.

'For someone who claims to be so busy he certainly kept you long enough,' he commented as they came on to the main road, sending a studied glance over the impeccable red silk suit. 'I must congratulate you, though, on how you've managed to emerge looking so cool. It must be difficult after all that fiery Latin passion.'

Anger bubbled through Jade. So he thought she had been making love!

'You were very rude to him,' she complained, bringing the car easily into the general flow of traffic. 'But then that's what you're being paid for, isn't it—to try and drive him out of my affections?'

'I wouldn't dream of breaking up such a suitable match.' Why did he sound so thoroughly uninterested? If it was lack of interest, she



thought, wondering if she was wrong when he suddenly said quietly, more seriously, 'Are you going to marry him, Jade?'

Did he want her to tell him that she wasn't? Was that what he was hoping? Pulling into a residential side-street she told herself sharply to stop being so fanciful. Of course he wasn't.

'I don't know,' she evaded, not wanting him to know that she wasn't affected by Juan in that way. 'He hasn't asked me yet, but-' She broke off as a car suddenly pulled out of a side-turning, making her swerve to avoid an impact, and she braked hard, screeching to a halt at a haphazard angle just short of someone's front garden wall.

'Are you all right?'

Tense and shaky, battling for control, she lifted her head from her arms on the steering-wheel to meet the cool concern on Kent's face. But she couldn't stop trembling, reliving the nightmare of that other accident—the way the papers blew it up, the guilt, the blame—and she felt Kent's hand on her arm, hearing the seat squeak as he moved nearer and said, surprisingly softly, 'It's all right. It wasn't your fault.'

Stupidly, she felt an almost uncontrollable urge to put her head on his shoulder and cry, trying to arrange her features into more composed lines as she sat back on the seat.

'Come on. I'll drive,' Kent said peremptorily.

'No.' White-faced, still shaking, feebly Jade tried to protest. 'I'm all right...'

'Like hell!' The slam of his door endorsed his firm intention to take over.

Weak-kneed, unfastening her seatbelt, Jade got out and in the other side, quietly relieved that he had insisted.

'Come on,' he said, manoeuvring the car with an ease that suggested he was used to handling such a powerful vehicle. 'I'll buy you lunch.'

'That isn't necessary,' she assured him, wondering why she was allowing him to take control when normally she resented anyone trying to run her life.

Nevertheless, she didn't argue when he said simply, 'Let me be the judge of that.'

He took her out into the country to a public house off the beaten track—a long, low thatched building where patrons were eating outside in the unusually hot May sunshine, and delicious cooking smells wafted towards them as they crossed the tarmacked area at the side.

'It probably isn't what you're used to,' Kent commented as they stepped through the low, rustic porchway, 'but they do an excellent home-cooked roast.'

And he just couldn't resist making that remark, could he? Jade realised with an injurious little stab, unable to help adding with an affectedly sweet smile, 'Besides which, a bodyguard's pocket doesn't quite stretch to the Hilton.'

'Only if your employer's Rufus Napier.' Blatantly he reminded her of the excessive fee his protection was costing her father. 'But I never could get used to the over-stuffed formality of those places.'

And he'd know them well, of course, Jade guessed, as custodian of the rich and politically famous, although she was surprisingly grateful herself to be away from the fulsome courtesy of the hotel waiters who knew her well.

From a cosy little nook, she watched him ordering the day's 'special' from the bar, wondering what sort of man lay behind that supremely

masculine exterior. He had been\*living under the same roof with her for well over a week now, and she still didn't know very much about him. He was a very private person; that much she did know from those long hours he spent in his suite—doing heaven knew what!—when he was off duty. She'd also gleaned, from comments he'd made, that he was from a working-class background, but behind that basic, calculated toughness of the man there was an autonomous self-assurance more characteristic of men like Juan and her father who had made it to the top of the financial ladder.

'Where were you born?' she ventured to ask him when they were tucking into their delicious and beautifully presented meal.

'Within earshot of Bow-' he smiled one of his breathcatching smiles '—which makes me a true Cockney.'

But that pure enunciation and perfect command of language wasn't associated with a lad who had been dragged up in the East end. Which said a lot for how hard he must have worked to advance and educate himself, Jade decided, especially when he went on to say, 'My father was a fish merchant and my mother worked as a dressmaker, but they were close. We all were. They're retired now.' Thinking of them seemed to bring a distant curve to his lips. 'Then I married, had Piers and got divorced.' And that was clearly all he was going to offer with regard to his marriage, Jade realised, disappointed when, lifting his glass of cool, amber lager, his gaze flickering over her, he changed the subject, saying, 'Now tell me something I don't already know about you.'

She ignored the derogatory implication she detected in his voice, saying only, 'It's all rather boring really. I was too young to remember my mother-' this with a small note of wistfulness '—and then as soon as I was old enough Dad packed me off to school.'

'You don't get on with him too well, do you?'

'You're very astute,' she said somewhat tartly, because it was obvious, although her stomach flipped as those grey eyes met hers across the table and he said with almost sensual softness,

'It's my job to be.'

Of course. Deliberately, she looked away, up at the copper pots and rustic farm implements hanging from the gnarled beams, wondering how even the slightest modulation of his voice could make her pulse throb. 'All he wanted was an heir to follow on in the business, and when he got his wish I suppose I was rather superfluous to his plans. I don't seem to be able to convince him that I'm an individual too,' she complained, looking directly at Kent now. 'That a woman isn't just something decorative—something to give birth over coffee mornings and flower-arranging while the men get on with the more interesting things in life like running the country and creating new enterprises—having something really worthwhile to show for their achievements. I'd just like him to realise that I'd like the same opportunities he's been planning for Jeremy ever since he was born.'

'You surprise me.' Across the table Kent was studying her obliquely.

'Why?' Her blue eyes were challenging. 'Because you thought I was only interested in skiing, sunbathing and spending money?'

His lips tugged downwards. 'Something like that.'

'Which goes to show you're just as influenced by what you read as the next person,' she reproved against a background of laughter from a crowded table in the far corner. 'But our grocery chain's been Dad's life, and I'm proud of it—of him! And I want to carry it on—promote it, get personally involved with my name on the boardroom door, and all Dad believes is that a woman's place is in the home, or looking pretty on some man's arm—so does Juan.' With a sigh she let her fork

toy absently with a piece of potato on her plate. 'What do you think?' she heard herself asking before she could check herself.

Finishing his lunch, he slipped his hands into his pockets and sat back against his chair. 'Does it matter what I think?' he enquired in softly challenging tones.

'Just wondering,' she said with a shrug, trying not to let him think that it mattered at all, though it was a surprise, even to herself, to realise that it did.

'I think a woman should have the right to follow any career she wants to—without question or argument,' he answered.

'Then can you tell my father that?' she laughed. 'He's pinned all his hopes on Jeremy, who just wants to sit around and scribble—anything and everything that comes into his head! I just hope he manages to measure up to all that's expected of him,' she commiserated, finishing her low-alcohol wine.

She half expected him to make some barbed comment, but he didn't, commenting only with, 'All a parent can do is hope his children turn out to be responsible adults— that's really all that counts.'

Was he intimating that she and Jeremy hadn't? she wondered, gazing absently at a large vase of gaily coloured spring flowers that stood in front of the basket of laid but unlit logs in the huge inglenook, aching to tell him the truth. That the lifestyle she courted, the reputation she upheld, was really only a cover-up- wanting to drop the facade and let him see the real, vulnerable human being beneath, but she didn't dare.

'That near-miss we had today...' Cruelly he brought her attention back to him and those earlier, frightening moments in the car. "Things like that happen all the time. Do you always get in such a state?"

*Only since that accident I caused.* Jade didn't know what stopped her from saying it. But she wasn't supposed to have cared, was she? Nevertheless, those steely eyes were so intense that desperately for a moment she wanted to open up to him, tell him everything—her affection-starved soul feeding on the attention that this man was suddenly sparing the time to give her. But, of course, that was one of the techniques of his training, Jade reminded herself with cold reasoning, and he only had the time because he *had* to be with her—paid an exorbitant fee to do so. Apart from which she felt she'd already exposed too much of herself as it was.

Familiarity rang that distant bell in her again—that shock of tawny hair, those eyes, that mouth—a feeling so acute that it brought the urgent entreaty to her lips, 'Where *have* I seen you before?'

His shrug was dismissive. 'I've been around.'

That wasn't what he had said when she'd asked him at that wedding, and for some unknown reason she felt absurdly uneasy. Especially when he changed the subject, saying, 'Do you want anything else?'

She didn't, and after settling the bill Kent escorted her out into the sunshine.

They had crossed a stone bridge before turning into the pub's car park earlier and, seeing her attention caught by the sparkling ribbon of river that flowed beneath it, he said, 'Want to take a look?'

The river was surprisingly shallow at that point—clean and gin-clear, flashes of silver betraying the lightning movements of fish darting for cover in the shadows of the bridge as she and Kent stopped to look over.

'Oh, look!' Pointing, Jade laughed at the sight of one female duck paddling downstream towards them with a whole host of fluffy brown chicks bobbing behind her. 'It's got one, two, three.. *twelve*

babies to contend with! Oh, Kent, aren't they cute? I wish I'd saved some of my roll.'

'And then you'd have had competition from the trout,' he assured her with a lazy smile. He was leaning with one arm on the wall, but all his attention was fixed on her. 'Do you like babies, Jade?'

His question was like a bolt out of the blue, his eyes so deeply mocking that she tore hers away, glad that her loose hair hid her face as she stared down at the sun- streaked water with her heart racing stupidly, her private dreams of sharing a happy family life with someone in the future well hidden behind a careless, 'Only if they're ducks.'

A curious wasp sang close to her ear and she brushed it away, sensing, even though she wasn't looking at Kent, those grey eyes still studying her thoughtfully. Well, let them! she acceded truculently. He already knew how profoundly he could affect her. But if he thought he could probe deeper into her emotions with that talk about babies...

'Oh, no!'

'What is it? What's wrong?'

'My earring...' The wasp had been worrying her again and in flipping it away she had knocked the earring loose, her dismay paramount as the platinum and diamond- studded little heart hit the water to a chorus of expectant quacking as the ducks shot over to investigate.

'Well, that should put the fishing rights up by a few thousand a year,' Kent commented drily, unaware of exactly how priceless those earrings were—to her anyway. 'Hey, where are you going?'

He had caught her by the arm before she could scramble down the bank beside the bridge. 'I have to get it back!' she protested.

'How?' Both his tone and his expression implied that she had taken leave of her senses. 'Did you mark the exact spot where it went in? Where it fell?'

'That's not the point,' she argued. 'I've got to get it back...'

She made a small sound of frustration as he continued to restrain her. 'For heaven's sake!' he breathed. 'You could get another designed, set *and* delivered before we...' His sentence tailed off from exasperation, but he was already stooping to remove his own shoes and socks, rolling up his trousers to his knees. 'If I'm still down there in an hour trade these to the first passer-by,' he grimaced, thrusting the light, casual shoes into her hands. 'They aren't going to be much good to me if I come up out of there with webbed feet.'

In spite of everything, Jade laughed, a light sound that followed him down the bank to the water.

It had to be cold, she thought, but he didn't flinch as he waded in, unlike the duck, which shot off with a protesting cackle, chicks in tow, under the bridge.

'You've frightened them,' she teased from above, and was met by such a promising glance to do more—and to her!—if she kept on that she held herself in check, feeling that if she didn't laugh about it she'd cry.

'Any luck?' she called out after a while, noticing the way the sun struck fire through the rich tawny hair as he scoured the water immediately below her. She took his silence for a negation as he disappeared beneath the bridge, trying to imagine Juan or even Russ getting their feet wet in a cold, weedy river to retrieve an earring, especially when she'd been fully intending to go in after it herself. Somehow she couldn't see either of them being that willing...



'You've found it!' Joy lit her face as suddenly Kent emerged from under the bridge, all other thoughts swept away by the sight of the glittering object he was holding above his head.

'The current washed it a little way downstream,' he called up to her, wading back now towards the bank. 'You're lucky some fish didn't see it shining and think it was a minnow, otherwise somebody could have been tucking into one hell of an expensive trout!'

She laughed exuberantly now, her mood only tempered by the *frisson* of awareness that shot through her as he stepped up on to the bridge and she met the untamed rawness of his masculinity. A button had come loose on his shirt, exposing the feathering of hair on his chest, his virility mirrored, too, in those strong, tanned legs, darkly encased by the hairs that clung wetly to them.

'Here.' He had dried the earring with his handkerchief, and since she was still clutching his shoes Jade couldn't stop him as he clipped the little diamond heart gently back on to her lobe, any more than she could stop her body from trembling at his touch, or the emotion that was welling up inside her.

'Hey... ?' He used a finger to tilt her chin, noticing the two silver beads glistening on her lower lids. 'I wouldn't have thought a girl with so many expensive trinkets would get so wound up over losing one.' 'No,' she sniffed, 'you wouldn't, would you?' And with blue eyes fixing levelly—reprovingly—on grey, 'Only these just happen to have been my mother's.'

She wasn't sure what was going through that keen brain, but a furrow deepened between the tawny brows, chasing mockery from that strong face. Quickly he rolled down his trouser legs, retrieving his shoes and socks, and then with a curious modulation in his voice he muttered, 'For goodness' sake, let's get back on the road!'

## CHAPTER FOUR

FOLLOWING her father's instructions, Jade continued to stay away from the office, though time spent at home in uncustomary idleness was making her restless and edgy. Her father was still in Paris, involved in the final negotiations of an agreement for the development of a massive food-processing plant in France, and this morning, Jade noticed, it had made headline news with one of the tabloids, along with the report on the latest of the companies in the Napier Group to realise healthy profits in spite of the recent recession.

'The family fortune just goes on getting bigger,' was Jeremy's dry comment as he tossed down a newspaper and got up from the breakfast table just as Kent entered the room. 'Doesn't it make you sick,' he subsequently remarked to the older man, 'seeing the way money makes money?'

Opening the patio doors to let in the warm morning air, Jade flinched from her brother's blatant impudence. Kent looked amused, though, she thought as she turned round, her gaze skimming of its own will over the blue shirt and darker blue cords hugging his lean hips as he drawled in response, 'Not half as much as it apparently appears to have made you.'

And he meant sick in the true sense, she realised, viewing the pale skin and darkly circled eyes of her brother.

'What time did you get in last night?' she enquired, feeling responsible for him while her father was away, even though he was old enough to look after himself.

'What would you do with her, Kent?' Jeremy was ignoring her, obviously less offended by Kent's remark than hers, but she'd been aware of a silent respect building in her brother for the older man ever

since the day Kent had taken an interest in several articles Jeremy had written, along with his discovery of Kent's mutual liking for jazz. 'I'm sure she means well, but honestly! It's like living with one's conscience!' And then, to Jade's humiliation, 'Why don't you marry her, Kent, and take her somewhere else to live? I'm sure you'd only have to snap your fingers and you'd be made for life.'

'Jeremy!'

He'd gone out, slamming the door, before either of them could utter a word.

'I'm sorry.' Jade met Kent's cool gaze with flushing embarrassment, nodding approval at his gesture to help himself to coffee from the silver pot on the sideboard.

'Stop apologising for him. It isn't your fault.'

He signalled his intention to refill her cup, but she shook her head. 'He isn't usually so difficult,' she said.

'No,' he agreed, as if he'd already guessed. 'But you said yourself that he's always come first with your father, so probably subconsciously now he feels he's taking second place to you because at the moment you're getting all the attention.'

'All the attention!' She shot an incredulous glance at him standing there, calmly sipping his coffee. 'Is that what you call it—having to be watched over day and night for fear of probable psychopaths? If this whole kidnapping thing isn't just a scheme by my father to make sure you keep me in line.'

'Believe me, it isn't.' He sent a swift downward glance over her light, loose top and yellow leggings. 'And these people aren't psychopaths,' he warned. 'They're probably shrewd, hard-headed intellectuals who'll stop at nothing to get what they want.'

And that was for Rufus Napier to refrain from signing the French agreement on the grounds that to do so would be depriving his own nationals of jobs at home. There had been another threat only yesterday, telephoned to her father in Paris, the nature of which now led them to suspect that some militant group was behind them.

'So why doesn't Dad do as they're asking?' she uttered in a rare moment of self-pity. 'They have a point,' she emphasised, although she knew why he wouldn't; knew, too, that she wouldn't have wanted or expected him to, even before Kent replied.

'Because one should never give in to threats, Jade- whatever the reason. When one does, that's where democracy ends and dictatorship begins.'

He was right, she thought—as strong and determined as her father, too, in many ways—her eyes unconsciously following every movement of those lean, sinewy hands as he drained his cup and set it down with a small ringing sound into its saucer.

'I'm sorry,' she said again. 'I'm afraid I'm not very good company at the moment. It's just that I'm so *bored*...' Which was an understatement, she thought with a deep, frustrated sigh, since over the past couple of days her movements had been severely restricted, with her father leaving orders that she was to postpone all routine engagements, which, as well as keeping away from the office, meant no tennis lessons, no lunches or teas in the West End, or anything else that she normally did on a regular basis where her movements might easily be noted. 'All right, so you believe we shouldn't give in to threats,' she breathed, feeling like a caged animal, her nerves stretched to the limit. 'Then I shouldn't let them stop me leading a normal life.' And on a small emphatic note that seemed wrenched from inside her, 'I just want to go out on my own!'

'No!' Suddenly, as she moved purposefully towards the door, he was in front of her, his broad-shouldered frame an invincible obstruction.

'No?' Tentatively, she licked her lips. Would he use force to stop her? Not that she'd be stupid enough to do it. But would he... ?

'No.' His voice was firm, the hands on her shoulders, hard and determined, resolute grey eyes meeting the tortured rebellion of blue. 'I'm not your jaoler, Jade,' he conveyed softly. 'Just here to protect you. But if it's being in my company that's getting to you day after day, then I can assure you it's certainly no picnic for me either! If you think I like being so close to you—constantly having to guard that lovely body without—'

Without what? There was raw emotion in his face, she noticed, dizzy from his nearness, that tension-locked aggression sending a reckless desire leaping through her as the next moment he crushed her to him, showing her exactly what he meant.

She uttered a small sound in her throat, the warmth of his mouth over hers creating a frenzy of need in her that she\* hadn't imagined herself capable of experiencing, her arms going up around his neck as he locked her tightly to him. Fingers sliding up to touch, caress, revel in the thick, springy texture of his hair, she moved wantonly against him, driven wild from his hard, impassioned strength, inviting the hands that slid down over her hips, pressing her to him, igniting a fire in her veins, her blood singing in response because his kiss was not the cold-blooded, punishing thing it had been the last time, but an open message of desire that suddenly had him lifting her up into his arms and carrying her to the *chaise-longue* beside the French windows, passion sending a violent tremor through his body.

'Kent...' Riven with need, she reached up and touched the rough texture of his jaw, the warm column of his throat, her fingers clutching tensely at his shoulder as he slipped his hand under the

loose silk top and found the heated silk of her midriff, her tensing ribcage.

She gave a small cry, glorying in the ecstasy of what those strong, warm hands were doing to her, feeling the tender mound of her breast respond with aching sweetness to his touch as she twisted against him, craving even closer contact with the taut, muscled hardness of his body.

'Sweet Jade...' His voice was husky, his hair tousled as he lifted his head to look at her lying flushed and dishevelled across his arm. 'My beautiful, bewitching Jade.'

She smiled tentatively up at him, half intimidated by the intensity of passion in his face, revelling in the knowledge that his desire matched hers when her fingers met the firm, warm flesh beneath the shirt she had pulled out of his waistband, dragging a shuddering groan from him that seemed to shake his powerful body.

'Good grief! You know how to turn a man on, don't you?' he breathed almost in reproof, catching her to him then and claiming her mouth with a passion that left her floundering in a sea of inexperience, his skilled hands working a technique of denial and arousal that brought small sobs of frustration from her lips.

No man had ever been able to drive her so crazy for him before! Not Juan—not even Russ with his self-centred parody of lovemaking that had left her disenchanted and unfulfilled. Even he hadn't brought her to the point where she couldn't have stopped if she'd wanted to, but she had reached it now with Kent, clawing her nails down the velvety flesh of his back in a mindless fever of the senses, while from seemingly far away a voice she recognised as her own was frantically begging, 'Oh, please, please, please...'

Just how far he would have taken things she was never to know, because suddenly the door was opening on the other side of the room, and a meekly embarrassed voice was uttering, 'Oh! I'm sorry, madam...'

Quickly Jade sat up, moving away from Kent and the *chaise-longue* with a flurried adjustment of her clothes, wondering how he could manage to sound so unperturbed as he called out, 'That's all right, Emma—come in.'

She wished he hadn't, feeling the little maid's curious glances in her direction as Emma piled the used breakfast dishes on to her trolley. And that wasn't all. Jade realised, noticing the secretly coveting looks the girl was sending towards Kent.

'Thank you, Emma, that will be all.'

From the sideboard where she was pretending to rearrange some flowers, Jade heard Kent's authoritative dismissal. And now it would be all over the house that not only was she sleeping with her bodyguard, but allowing him to give orders as well! she despaired, as the girl uttered a complaisant, 'Yes sir,' and went out.

Still shaken from the frightening intensity of her response to his lovemaking, and the fact that she would have let him take it to its natural conclusion if he had intended to, she turned from the sideboard to express tremulously, 'I'd prefer it if you left me to direct members of the staff.'

He shrugged, immaculate, as always again having readjusted his own clothes and raked back his hair. 'You didn't seem to be entirely capable of directing anything.'

He was right, of course, but Emma's coming in like that had unsettled her beyond belief, her struggle for the composure she hadn't yet

recovered combining with frustration to make her snap unduly. 'And whose fault was that?'

He smiled. 'I was under the impression it was entirely mutual,' he said softly. Yes, it was, she accepted, and her body still ached for his, so much that it was an immense effort to refrain from crossing the carpeted space between them and pressing herself back into his arms, though she was more than glad she had when his smile suddenly faded and as if he'd been giving it some consideration he uttered, 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let it happen.'

Of course, he would be regretting it now, she thought, leaning back against the dresser for support as the cold reminder that he didn't want to get emotionally involved with her had a weakening effect on her limbs.

'So why did you?' she challenged, hurt. And, afraid that he would guess how much, 'To alleviate my boredom? Or were you suddenly considering that Jeremy's suggestion might be an attractive idea after all?' Anguish trickled through her from the mere suggestion that that might be a possibility, too great to be wholly appeased even though he shook his head.

'Oh, don't miscalculate my motives,' he said. 'The fact that I can't resist that dangerous desirability of yours is attributable solely to the fact that you're a very beautiful woman and I'm very much a man—but I've certainly no intention of considering myself as Mr Jade Napier— now, or at any time in the future.'

She couldn't understand why his words should tear so viciously into her, and only pride prevented her from revealing it as she supplied with barbed-edged poignancy, 'Just as my lover.'



'No, not even that.' Surprisingly, it took every ounce of his will-power, it seemed, for him to say it, the heavy wall of his chest clenched by an inner tension.

And it wasn't just her reputation that was responsible for his grim resolve. Intuitively, she knew he would be too proud a man—too self-sufficient—to tag on to someone as rich as she was; he'd need to be the mainstay in any relationship he formed with a woman—or on an equal footing at least. And while she'd dreamed of meeting such a man—vulnerable as she was to the hollow insincerity of fortune-hunters—what she had never stopped to consider was that such a man might not want her, and both anger and an unwilling respect for him combined with some other emotion to form an aching void inside her as she wondered how much, if any, his reluctance to even give her a chance had to do with Karen Williams.

'In that case, may I remind you that you're still merely my father's employee?' Her voice shook as she tried to inject some degree of authority into it, trying not to acknowledge how the way he could so easily discard her could hurt. 'I've got a lot to do today, and I'll never be ready for tonight if I waste any more time talking to you.'

She was almost at the door when she heard his deep, incredulous tones behind her. 'You aren't still seriously intending to go to that party?'

Jade stopped dead, her back stiffening. 'Yes, it so happens I am,' she retaliated, turning to meet the dark, smouldering anger in his eyes. Already she had had one heated argument with him over this subject the previous night, after Juan had first telephoned with the invitation.

'After what your father's advised about keeping as low a profile as possible? And from what I've read about Rodriguez this thing's hardly likely to be particularly small or hush-hush, is it?'

She gave a small, tense laugh, unable to tell him that she was desperate for Juan's company—for this party—as a shield against these emotions that were consuming her for *him*, and, with a provocative little pout, 'Poor Kent,' she teased. 'Afraid it'll be too big for you to handle? Or is it what my father's going to say that you're afraid of?' Her eyes were glittering like gemstones as she smiled up at him, breathing in a conspiratorial whisper, 'So how much do I have to pay you not to tell him?'

A muscle tugged at the side of his jaw, giving a hard line to his mouth. 'Both you and your brother are the same. You think everything can be bought, don't you?'

Inwardly she winced from his cold, unyielding view of her. 'Can't it?' she nevertheless uttered with bitter cynicism.

He seemed about to say something in response, but obviously thought better of it, saying only, 'So you're adamant about going.'

It sounded so much like a threat that Jade's chin came up with staunch determination. 'Why not? I intend to have *some* fun!' she snapped. 'And if you don't think it's safe, then protect me. That's what you're being paid for, isn't it?'

She turned away, pulling open the door Emma had closed behind her, wanting to get out of the room so that he wouldn't see the strain that arguing with him had wrought on her pale, tense features, this illogical pain in knowing that he wasn't concerned in any way for her—just keen to follow orders to keep her away from Juan, flinching as she heard him rasp behind her, 'You really are the most self-indulgent little...'

'Little what?' She swung round, hiding her injured pride behind a forced defiance. 'Bitch?'

'Yes, damn you!' His face was flushed with anger, but she failed to see why—why her taking what he considered to be risks should produce such a reaction in him—until it dawned that it was simply because she was making his job harder for him, that was all. And if he thought she was self-indulgent, she thought, she'd show him the real meaning of the word! And that very afternoon she chartered one of the company's executive jets to take her to a beauty salon in Paris, from where she emerged hours later, fully massaged, manicured and with her dark hair swept up into an elegant French pleat to complement the exquisite make-up which was met by only mocking appraisal from Kent.

'Very nice,' he drawled, looking almost amused as she joined him in the little street cafe where he had been waiting. 'I only hope your boyfriend thinks it's worth it.'

And that was that—with scarcely another word to her as they took the taxi to the airstrip and flew back across the Channel, so that Jade couldn't help feeling miserably that her outrageous endeavours to shock and provoke him had, once again, somehow backfired.

The party—as Jade recalled Kent anticipating earlier— was extremely well attended. Even so, one glance around the lounge of the elaborate Essex mansion showed that there wasn't another man there with the charismatic presence of the tawny-haired man at her side. A man who made heads turn with that compelling authority, great looks and arresting physical magnetism, adding up to an intensely powerful sexuality that was only strengthened by the custom-tailored elegance of a dark suit, pristine-white shirt and silk tie.

'Jade, darling! You look spectacular beyond speech!'

Despairing with herself for being so aware of her chaperon, Jade took Juan's florid greeting as a welcome distraction.

'Thank you, dearest—but it's *words*,' she corrected laughingly, unaffected by that wickedly dark gaze that touched her pale creamy shoulders, the blaze of emeralds at her throat, drifting rakishly down over the soft layers of emerald silk chiffon to her matching sandals. So why should that cool, studied interest she was aware of from Kent make her heart beat so ridiculously fast, sharpening her senses to that devastating sexual aura surrounding him?

'It is my luck to have a teacher as beautiful as this. You envy me, no?' Juan's teeth glinted beneath his moustache, though the look he gave Kent couldn't boast the same warmth.

Kent made no answer, only with a lazy half-smile that caused Juan's gaze to dart suspiciously to Jade and then back to Kent again, so that she was embarrassed to feel a rush of hot colour flooding her cheeks. Yet why should she feel like this just because he had kissed her—touched her? she demanded firmly of herself, still immeasurably unsettled by the intensity of passion he had wrung from her that morning. So she was relieved to hear Juan saying. 'OK, Solomon. Go now and unwind yourself with a few glasses of my champagne. It's the best of its vintage, as I'm sure you'll agree, if you know anything about champagne-' his tone assumed that Kent wouldn't '—but you can rest assured, as I tried to convince you before, that your baby is safer than safe with me,'

His arm went protectively around her, and silently Jade cursed that imperfect English that had provided Juan with such an unwise choice of noun, catching the flicker of mockery in Kent's eyes before he looked away from her to Juan and drawled, 'I'll take your word for it, Rodriguez—on both counts.'

He meant the champagne as well, since he had insisted on her bringing the Porsche instead of drawing attention to herself with the Rolls, saying that he'd drive back—because, of course, his job demanded that he watch and stay sober. Nevertheless, she couldn't

prevent a futile little wish that she could smash down that inimitable self-control, gaining some satisfaction in paying him back with a small triumphant smile as the other man's arm tightened around her, drawing her away.

So why suddenly did she feel so bereft, wishing it was Kent's arms around her instead of these that didn't move her in any way? Why couldn't she feel half the desire for Juan that was driving her so crazy for her bodyguard when Juan made no secret of wanting her, while Kent Solomon was both impervious and immune?

'What's wrong with you, my love?' Juan breathed as he handed her a glass of his recommended champagne, sounding a little impatient because somehow she'd failed to concentrate on something he had been saying. 'You seem tense and fretful tonight.'

Awkwardly, Jade laughed. 'It's just the threats,' she bluffed. 'They've been making me edgy, I suppose,' saying anything to detract from the truth, from the shocking fact that she was dangerously infatuated with Kent. For what other crazy reason would she feel butterflies in her tummy just from the most casual physical contact with him? Warm towards him when he showed indulgence towards her brother, finding herself respecting him—and for the very scruples that kept him distant and aloof from her, despising her—which was why she vowed he must never find out. If he did, then he might use her just as Russ had—despite all his claims to be unimpressed by her money. At best, he might simply pity her, while remaining loyal to his bitchy Karen—and she knew she'd never be able to stand the humiliation of that. Consequently, when Juan urged her out into the garden for the purpose of trying to persuade her to go away with him the following day, she began to consider whether it might be the best idea—the solution that might help her break away from Kent.

'I'm not sure. I...' 'My love, what have you to lose?' Instantly Juan had picked up on her wavering uncertainty. 'I have already taken the

liberty of reserving a seat in case you change your mind—two, if you feel you need that... muscle-

man to protect you when I'm-

'No!' It was a small, panicky sound over the soft rustle of leaves from some acacias in the dusky garden and which she strove to cover up by adding quickly, 'I'll be perfectly safe in Caracas. It's only here that some crank's trying to frighten me undercover—only don't tell him about this trip, because Dad's obsessed with keeping me watched day and night, and he'll insist-'

'My dear, you sound almost afraid of the man...' 'Don't be silly.' He had got the adjective right—just got the context wrong this time, because it was her own feelings, where they would ultimately lead her, that she was afraid of, and though she wasn't even keen on going to Venezuela—knew it was wrong to use Juan's offer as a shield against her escalating feelings for Kent—almost against her better judgement she heard herself murmuring, 'All right, I'll come with you. I'll meet you at the airport in the morning and be on that plane before he's even missed me. Just as long as you realise that this doesn't change our relationship in any way. It's still strictly platonic—is that understood?'

'Understood.'

It wasn't, she thought despairingly, seeing that familiar hot gleam in Juan's eyes, deliberately turning her head to avoid his kiss so that his lips met only the cool satin of her cheek. She didn't, however, resist the arm that guided her back inside, hoping that Kent would notice and read more into the embrace than there was, which, in some illogical way, she felt, would help ease the shameful memory of the intimacy she had practically begged from him earlier in the day. It didn't help, however, when she noticed him somewhere on the other side of the room—uninterested, if not unaware—smiling lazily at

some redhead who had just approached him, and some cruel emotion clawed viciously at her insides.

After that she danced until her feet were sore, drowning her frustrations—along with her anxieties over the decision she had made—in more champagne than she would have normally considered wise. And it was only when Juan excused himself to attend to some departing guests that Jade pulled out of the energetic rock number and stepped backwards into Kent's tautly muscled frame.

'Had enough?' He grimaced at her hot, flushed features, a tower of cool command from his head right down to the dark, impeccable sheen on his shoes.

'No,' she countered, deliberately opposing him, though her body was refusing to, responding with shocking profundity to the strong, steadying arm across her back. 'I intend to dance and dance all night.' And tomorrow she would be free! She'd already decided that she wouldn't tell anyone beforehand—not even Jeremy. She'd ring him from the other side of the Atlantic.

Wondering why the prospect of getting away should make her feel less than jubilant, she forced herself not to think about it as Kent commented, 'You look hot. Let me get you a drink.'

Dared she risk another? 'I don't know...' After all, she didn't want to be flying off to South America with a hangover in the morning, and, contrary to what she had just told him, she intended to leave very soon to get the things together that she would need for the trip.

'You refuse one drink with me? Why? Scared of upsetting lover-boy? I wonder what he'd say if he knew that only this morning I had you-'

'Stop it!' Anger flared in her eyes with the pain of his ultimate rejection. She wanted to forget it! To put this whole shaming infatuation with him behind her, her desperation to do so

strengthening her confidence in her decision to go to Venezuela with Juan. 'You wouldn't tell him... ?'

It was half a warning, half a plea to him as she realised that if he did it would terminate any hope she had of getting away from him.

'And spoil our beautiful friendship?' He laughed from deep in his chest, though no amusement registered in the hooded grey of his eyes. Briefly his gaze fell to the glittering necklace and lifted again. 'What would you like? Something long and cool?'

Jade nodded, and watched as he shouldered his way through the rest of the party, across the wide room, aware of a dull ache deep down in her stomach. After tonight she would probably never see him again. Which was what she wanted, wasn't it? So why... ?

'Hello, Jade.' Lost in her own thoughts, she started as someone spoke to her—the ravishing redhead she had seen talking with Kent earlier and who had probably recognised her from newspaper photographs, she thought, though she'd never met the woman before. 'How do you manage to engage the attentions of the sexiest-looking man at this party when you've already got the richest eating out of your hand?' She laughed, looking covetously towards Kent, who was already on his way back to them. 'The moody, mysterious type, isn't he? I suppose having a daddy supplying food to practically the entire *world* means you don't get quite the charming brush-off he gave me!'

'Here.'

Deaf to that jealously feminine laughter hanging on the air, Jade was only alive to Kent's lethal proximity as she was left alone with him again—to the cold glass he was placing in her hand.

'Been swapping secrets with my tedious admirer?' he smiled wryly.



She laughed, the situation suddenly striking her as funny. 'Perhaps you need protecting more than I do?' she whispered, teetering forward just a little too much and giggling as his hands came up to steady her, though sensations rocketed through her from the briefest touch of those hands on her bare shoulders.

'Perhaps,' he said quietly, some vulnerable emotion in that strong face making her heart lurch sharply- making her wonder if he meant from her as he lifted his glass in a salutary gesture and with a smile that gave a sudden, breathcatching warmth to his features proposed, 'No hard feelings, Jade?'

Almost she fancied that those words had a ring of finality about them—as though he knew somehow that their relationship was about to change. As though he'd guessed! she thought guiltily, murmuring some nervous response and putting her glass to her lips before he could detect the deepening colour in her cheeks.

'Heavens!' she breathed, gasping and coughing over the dark red liquid. 'Whatever's this supposed to be?'

He laughed at the faces she was pulling. 'It's only a punch.'

'You can say that again!' It had a kick like a wild stallion! It was, however, delicious—long and cold and fruity—and so thirst-quenching after dancing all night that it was an effort restraining herself from gulping it all down in one go.

'I'll protect you, Kent.' She supposed it was the alcohol talking, a mixture of champagne and whatever-it- was punch making her do things she wouldn't normally do—say, not altogether aware of how her hand had come to be touching the fine material of his shirt, registering the steady rhythm of his heart beneath, while somehow her fingers were getting caught up in the smooth silk of his tie. 'If any woman wants to get at you, they'll have to get through me first. Do

you think I'll make a good bodyguard? As good-' Somehow, one of her feet got in the way of the other and she stumbled against him, giggling.

'You're drunk, darling.' Over the music and lively voices of the other guests, those deep tones breathed softly into her hair.

'No, I'm not. I...' As well as battling with the havoc his hard warmth was causing in her, her words wouldn't come out that easily. Her jaw felt like it did after she'd been to the dentist and the anaesthetic hadn't quite worn off, though that gentlest of admonishments in his voice had her pressing on indignantly, 'Contrar-ary to what you might hear, I rarely drink anything very strong.'

'No?' He gave her a disbelieving smile. 'Then what's this?\*' He dropped a glance down at the glass she was still holding. 'Scotch mist?'

Reminded, Jade lifted the long glass and swallowed its remaining contents in one gulp, brandishing it in the direction of a passing waiter before Kent prised it from her fingers, with a quietly rasped, 'Behave yourself,' setting it down on a nearby table with his own.

She laughed again, feeling marvellously light-headed. 'Aren't I?' she pouted, trying to look innocent, excited by the way he was looking at her in that deliciously disapproving fashion, shaking his head. 'You called me darling.' Was she really saying this to him? Daring to press her body so close to his, caressing the strong hair at the nap of his neck? Or was she dreaming? It felt like a dream.

'Did I?' His voice was so warm and deep, acting like an aphrodisiac on her senses.

'You know you did.'

Why wasn't he answering her? Instead he was looking over her head—now somewhere else across the room, and though her face felt numb and the light-headedness in her skull seemed to be paralysing her faculties she could sense the restlessness in him—an unusual agitation—the guardedness of the jungle animal watching for danger, waiting to slay or be slain.

Of course, he was doing his damned duty...

Unconsciously, she dropped her head against the strong column of his throat and groaned, 'Kent, be human for once.' Did she imagine that arm around her tightening? She wasn't sure, only that the scent of his skin was erotically drugging, the flexing muscles of his chest seeming to amplify the heavy beat of his heart against hers as an unwelcome and familiar voice came to her as if through a dense fog.

'Jade! She is all right?'

Juan! She had forgotten about him! Reluctantly, she lifted her head from the cushion of that warm shoulder, remembering, through an eternity of time, the agreement she had made to go away with him.

'It's nothing a good night's sleep won't cure.'

Grief, she couldn't even see properly! she realised, hearing Kent's cool statement, blinking to try and focus on Juan, who looked unusually stern.

'Then I take her home.' Purposefully, he caught her by the arm so that she swayed unsteadily towards him, and was grateful for that stronger arm that seemed to be the only thing holding her up.

'After the amount you've been drinking?' Kent's voice was strung with unequivocal authority. 'You're way above the limit, Rodriguez—and totally unfit to drive anyone anywhere. And if you weren't, Jade's car only seats two, and as I'm being paid to stay with

her I hardly think that leaves room for anyone else. Unless, of course, you're planning to squeeze into the back, but, unlike your vintage champagne, it isn't a thing I'd recommend.'

He had left Juan no room for argument, either, Jade decided through the swirling jumble of her thoughts, giving the South American a big smile—all she felt up to—and nodding her agreement, and in an effort to chase away the displeasure on his face, leaned forward with her hand on his arm and whispered, 'T'morrow,' wondering why she was having so much difficulty articulating her words.

'You weren' very nice t'im.' She wagged a disapproving finger at Kent as he guided her out to the car, grabbing at the back of his jacket in a fit of giggling as she nearly fell down some steps, but for that iron arm clamping her securely to his side. 'Grief, I feel so...'

'So what?'

She didn't notice the calculating look he gave her as she tried to shake away the giddiness in her head, trying to remember what she had had to drink. Not that much, surely? 'I don't know, I...' Her words tailed off as they reached the Porsche, its bodywork gleaming where the moonlight spilled across it.

Kent unlocked the passenger door, his arm still around her, but as she went to step in her legs seemed to buckle under her and, giggling, she fell against the car, something like electricity seeming to pulse through her numbed senses as he lifted her, crushing the emerald chiffon against his body.

'Mmm, you're strong,' she breathed, excited by his strength, her arms going willingly around his neck.

'You'd better believe it.' There was something thrilling, yet ominous too, in the way he said that, but she was too dazed to wonder about it

as she was lowered into the Porsche and belted in with steady, capable hands.

'Why did we have to leave s'soon—I wasn't ready to,' she heard herself slur in protest as he climbed in and started the car.

He didn't answer her, though, pulling away in silence, and Jade dropped her head wearily against the rest, staring out from beneath heavy lids at the shadowy countryside flitting by.

Countryside? Something tugged at her brain but wouldn't hang on, wouldn't register—and her head rolled round on the rest to meet Kent's dark, purposeful profile.

Dark—like the devil. Dark and exciting. She giggled, wondering why he wouldn't look at her, wondering why he was sitting there looking so demonic. So...

She couldn't make her eyes stay open, no matter how hard she willed them to, aware only of that confident thrust of power as the Porsche growled into the night, receptive, doing his bidding, carrying her into dark, darkest oblivion.

## CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN Jade opened her eyes, she didn't know where she was. She could hear sporadic sounds that she couldn't quite come to terms with, only aware that the wood-panelled room in which she was lying with its chintzy curtained window where the sun streamed in seemed to sway occasionally, and that as soon as she lifted her head everything started to spin.

She felt sick—dreadfully sick—and, leaning over the side of the bed, she found the bowl that had been put on the cabinet beside it, presumably for that purpose, which she grasped, vomiting into it until her retching stomach ached.

'Oh, God,' she groaned, lying back, wishing there were some way she could alleviate the foul taste in her mouth, this unbearable feeling of dehydration—only fully aware then that she was naked except for her briefs. So where were the rest of her clothes? And who had undressed her? Had Kent? And where was she? She racked her brains, trying to remember, wondering why it hurt so much to think.

The room, though, had stopped spinning as soon as she had lain back, but she could still sense that peculiar, indefinable movement at times, and it wasn't until her straining ears suddenly recognised the quiet lapping of water that she realised she was on a boat.

'Oh, *no*.' She tried to sit up—too quickly, the result of which brought on another spasm of vomiting after which she collapsed against the pillows again with another anguished groan, just as a deep voice spoke from the doorway.

'I'm sorry I had to do this to you but, believe me, there wasn't any other way.'

Kent had come in and was bending over her with a glass of water and a couple of white tablets on a tray, and, frowning, Jade grasped the

tumbler, hardly aware of how calm and imposing he looked in a long-sleeved black shirt and black trousers as he watched her drink thirstily—as if he'd known.

'Where am I?' she puzzled, as soon as she could take a breath to speak. 'Where have you brought me? What happened?' One hand went to her temple, the crease deepening between her eyes as she tried to remember, tried to think through the sickly ache inside her head.

'You should have done as I said and stayed at home last night, and you wouldn't be asking me all these questions. Poor little rich girl...' There was something daunting in the silky voice as that grey gaze flicked over her, assessed her confusion. 'Haven't you worked it out yet?' he said, the quiet ruthlessness of his tone penetrating her torpid senses, awakening a cold, basic instinct of fear.

Jade thought of the threats; of his caginess to reveal too much of himself and his own reference to the kidnappers being hard-headed intellectuals. How had he known? And then there had been his firm insistence that she take her own car to that party. Why? So that he wouldn't have the added complication of Henry...? Her fingers tightened around her glass; her wild reasoning only seemed to confirm her fear of the worst, and almost inaudibly she uttered, 'So it was you?' He seemed not to hear, thrusting the tray containing the tablets towards her, saying, 'Don't you think you'd better take these?'

Afraid, she shook her head, her darkly circled eyes hurt and mistrusting so that he said by way of reassurance, 'They're only effervescent. They'll probably do you some good.'

Still refusing, she dumped the empty glass back on the tray he was holding, asking in wounded entreaty, 'Why? What good can you possibly hope to gain out of doing this?'

He answered without hesitation, his words piercing her like sharpened spears. 'I would have thought it would be obvious—even to you.'

His gaze slid over her pale, pained features to the creamy slope of her shoulders, making her clutch the single duvet fearfully to her naked breasts. 'Where are my clothes?'

'Don't you mean your gown?' His mouth quirked, so that he looked more like the man she'd believed had been protecting her—the man she'd trusted—rather than this ruthless kidnapper who was a stranger to her now and who, still seemingly amused, was saying, 'At least, that was all you were wearing—apart from that scanty piece of green nonsense I thought you'd feel happier if I left on. As for the dress... I thought that that would be best withheld until I can at least rest assured that you won't be foolish enough to try and run away.'

As she slumped back against the padded headboard, feeling totally washed out, it dawned on her with a measure of surprise that her watch, and the emerald earrings and necklace she'd been wearing, were on the cabinet beside the bed. Absently, her gaze followed the sun's path across the chintzy duvet to the varnished oak wall and ceiling where it struck light from the tasteful fittings. 'Is that why you drugged me?'

'Not drugs, Jade.' The double bed creaked, its mattress yielding as, disconcertingly, Kent sat down beside her. 'A simple thing called vodka. Undetectable in grenadine punch and effective enough in quantity to render you incapable of offering any opposition—especially after several glasses of champagne.'

So that was why she'd felt so giggly and light-headed! she remembered, as the events of the previous night started to trickle slowly back. He'd got her drunk—deliberately—so that he could carry out his plan with comparative ease!



Unbidden tears welled into her eyes. Oh, why did it hurt so much to realise he'd been disloyal? 'So why didn't you just bump me on the head?' she asked censoriously, lowering her eyes so that he wouldn't see the emotion betraying her.

'Because the last thing I wanted to do was hurt you.'

She could almost have believed the sincerity in his voice, surprised accusation bringing her tortured eyes to his, the softness of his tone loosening the tears she couldn't have held back from him even if she had wanted to. What the hell did he think he was doing, then, if this wasn't hurting her?

'So... how—how much are you demanding?' she faltered, not wanting to know the answer.

A deep groove scored the intellectual brow. 'What?'

Perhaps he didn't like her choice of words! she thought irefully. Perhaps it was thinking himself above the common abductor that made him look at her with such distaste, but undeterred she pressed on. 'You've got a price, haven't you?' Resolutely she lifted her chin, determined that she wouldn't show any outward fear of him— of what he was doing. 'Every kidnapper has a cost—or a cause! Are there several of you, or only one? And were you working this out all that time ago when you were involved with Uncle Silas? Was it part of a long-term plan to get him and the rest of my family to trust you?' And then, 'What do you want from us?' she finished in trembling, agonised appeal.

His features took on a look of chiselled stone, and he muttered some imprecation beneath his breath that she didn't catch.

'What I want, Jade,' he began, with the life returning to that strong face now, 'is for you to stay here until you can come to your senses and realise that someone out there is very serious about using

criminal intervention to stop your father from signing that French agreement—because, damn you for thinking it—but it certainly isn't me!' Stunned, disbelieving, she stared up at him as he went on, 'Your father gave me sanction to take any steps I deemed necessary to keep you out of the hands of unscrupulous people, and I intend carrying out his wishes with your consent or without it. I've had nothing but uncooperation from you from the minute I took this job—and since you clearly aren't grown-up enough to determine what's good for you and what isn't, then someone else is going to have to do it for you. And if that means holding you against your will until you come to your senses, realise that it isn't safe to carry on indulging in that pampered, partying existence of yours while those threats are still hanging over you—so be it.'

'Then you...'

Words failed her as unbelievable relief overrode the other emotions oozing through her. 'It isn't you...?'

'Did you really imagine it was?' Bathed in sunlight, that strong face expressed wry contempt at the answer he read in her blue eyes, and he swore again, more explicitly this time. 'For heaven's sake, Jade! You're not exactly the best judge of character, are you? I might not belong to your "jet set", but I'm afraid you've got the wrong guy! Perhaps it's your friend Rodriguez you were so ready to sneak away with that you should be directing those suspicions towards!'

'Juan? Don't be ridiculous!' Relief was giving way to anger now as it began to dawn on her how shrewd this man really was. 'You knew about the trip... ?'

'Not knew—guessed. Oh, come on, Jade,' he said smoothly as those grey eyes acknowledged her amazement, 'it didn't take much working out. He was flying off today and he wanted you with him—I can't say I blame him for that—but, because I know what a perfect little rebel you are, it was obvious that you'd ignore all the fatherly advice you'd been given and plan a last-minute little escapade to go with him.'

Maybe he's OK, where any criminal dealings are concerned, but he does have a few suspect associates who haven't yet been fully investigated, and until they are...' His shoulder lifted in a dismissive gesture and he stood up, towering above her with lethal intimidation, the matter settled— at least where he was concerned.

'And don't you think Juan will have telephoned me at home, and then called the police when I didn't show up at the airport?' Jade tried to reason through her debilitating sickness. She wasn't sure what the time was, but from the height of that sun she'd slept most of the morning away. 'And if *he* hasn't-' her eyes flashed anger as she realised that she was still his prisoner, if not for the reason she'd first thought '—then Jeremy will—when I eventually fail to come home.'

'My thinking entirely,' Kent was saying with impenetrable self-possession, 'so I took the precaution of telephoning Paris on the way here last night to let your father know what measures I'd decided to take.'

'You what?' Her black hair fell starkly around her colour-drained face as she looked up at him, flabbergasted by how manipulative he could be, even with someone as wary as her father—how he'd managed to secure his complete trust.

'Yes. So no doubt he'll have given some plausible explanation to your brother for your absence by now— but whether he's thought to extend one to your boyfriend, frankly I don't care. If he couldn't see the risks he was subjecting you to in trying to lure you off without proper protection-'

'He wasn't,' Jade intervened in Juan's defence. 'It was my idea to go without you-' She broke off, colouring as Kent studied her intently, wondering if he had any inkling of the reason why.

'Then you've only got yourself to blame for being so senseless, haven't you?' he reprehended, as though he were -talking to a child. 'And after the concern you've caused your father it wouldn't surprise me if he didn't make a point of letting Rodriguez think that you'd ditched him in favour of my attentions instead.'

Jade swallowed, her quickening pulse doing nothing to help her sickly head. 'He'd never think that!' she retorted hotly, discomfited by the sudden, vague recollection that she'd behaved rather brashly with Kent—and in front of Juan—at the party the previous night. 'Anyway, he'd only have to pick up the phone and ask Jeremy,' she informed him nevertheless. 'He knows I... don't like you in that way...' She was picking her words carefully, finding this subject wholly disturbing since he was so close and since she was lying there practically naked under the duvet.

'You know that's a lie as well as I do,' Kent drawled, making her blush from her neck down to the tips of her toes. 'And you're forgetting that fickle reputation of yours, my sweet. But if he—or anyone else—is in any doubt where your affections lie, they need only ask Emma—or perhaps any other of the Napier household now—who'll vouch that you've already added me to your list of lovers and are probably at this very moment somewhere lost in the ecstasies of sublime passion.'

So it had all been staged—his lovemaking in the dining- room yesterday morning! He'd probably been planning this even then, which was why he'd seemed so unperturbed when Emma had walked in—and strangely that hurt more than anything else he had done.

'You bastard,' she uttered quietly.

That firm mouth moved wryly. 'Not half as much as someone else might have been,' he told her without pulling any punches, and she knew he was talking about the people who had been making those kidnap threats. Assiduously, then, he removed the bowl and tray,

taking them out of the room, returning to open a closet concealed within the polished panelling of the wall.

'Here.' He tossed a dark blue towelling bathrobe down on the bed. 'You can put this on as soon as you feel like getting up. Can you stomach anything to eat yet?'

Jade shook her head. 'Where are we?' she asked uncertainly, only able to detect through the small oblong window that they were moored against a riverbank, the croaking of waterfowl and the occasional splash as something moved in the reeds the sounds that had baffled her when she had been coming round.

'Welcome to my retreat.' His smile was sardonic. 'It's an old barge I had structurally renovated to my own specifications and which I keep moored here on the Hampshire Avon—the ideal place for getting away from it all. It's a few miles from the nearest village and so offers perfect seclusion, and that-' he indicated towards the reed-fringed bank '—that's a little river island and no more than a refuge for waterfowl. The only link with dry land on that side-' he jerked his chin in the direction of what must have been the main riverbank '—is by means of a dinghy, but I've removed the oars for the time being in case you get any ideas about sneaking off alone, and there isn't a telephone on board—I find them too much of an intrusion into my work—so if you do get designs on running off, I'm afraid there's nothing left but to swim.'

He went out then without another word, and Jade leaned back defeatedly against the headboard.

He'd thought of everything, hadn't he? From setting the scene to ensure that Emma had seen her as a willing party-to his kisses, she realised with a dull ache of desolation; ringing her father; even to taking away her clothes! He'd given her his bathrobe, it was true, but she could hardly swim ashore in that, and as he'd already said that was

her only chance of getting away he knew he was on a pretty safe bet that she wouldn't even entertain the idea unless she didn't mind emerging on the other side of the river in nothing but a pair of emerald satin briefs!

Damn him! she cursed torturedly, acknowledging the veritable isolation of the little island through the gap in the floral curtains where even now a solitary mallard that had waddled into vision sat preening itself, confident in the knowledge that its habitat would remain undisturbed. He'd also said there was no telephone either, she recalled through her alcohol-anguished senses, reflecting on his comment about it being an intrusion into his work. But what work was he talking about? And why would a simple bodyguard want such solitude?

The questions went round and round inside her brain— unanswered because, feeling unwell, and slipping down on to the pillows again, she fell asleep, and dreamt that she was being gently roused from a summer meadow by the brush of lips across her brow, her senses hanging on to an elusive limey scent—Kent's scent—her answer a murmured, aching response because somewhere, in some other distant dream, he had called her 'darling'.

And it was still a dream, she realised, disappointed when she opened her eyes to see the sun playing further along the cabin wall although, strangely, she thought she could still smell that limey scent hanging on the air as if her dream had fused with reality, before her nostrils caught the stronger, tantalising smell of something cooking.

The door nearest her cabin revealed nothing more than the engine-room, she discovered, when she was up and dressed in the robe, deciding that the afterdeck and tiller would lie beyond that. Her own room she had already deduced—from its double bed and tasteful furnishings—to be the master bedroom. Which meant that, at least, Kent had considered her comfort, she thought as she was drawn by

the cooking smells and sounds along the parquet-floored passageway to the galley.

'So you're up,' Kent sent her a cursory glance, grimacing at the robe rolled back at the cuffs and bunched at the waist where it was too big for her, his gaze touching briefly on her face still bearing the smudges of the previous night's make-up that lent a wanton heaviness to her eyes. 'Are you hungry?'

She nodded, watching him shake a pan over one hob of the small electric stove, guessing that the grounding he'd had in his profession would have strengthened those already sharp instincts of self-efficiency and survival. There wasn't any sign of anyone else's occupation aboard, though—either feminine or otherwise—she noted, with a quick, covert glance through the dinette where room-dividing curtains were tied back to reveal the small but comfortably furnished saloon, and she uttered curiously, 'I thought you said your son lived with you.'

'He does.'

'Where is he now?'

She watched him scrape some chopped tomatoes from a board on to the sliced, sizzling onions. 'Staying with his grandparents in Surrey.'

'Not his mother?'

He glanced up, aware of that tentative little note that had crept into her voice.

'When we split up, there was a complicated legal tussle for custody which didn't do Piers any good at all. He was only four at the time. Valerie never adapted to motherhood very well, and initially, when she left, she left us both. When she lost the case she fought for guardianship, she bowed out gracefully enough, and didn't seem too

concerned one way or the other afterwards whether she saw her son or not. Now, though, she's decided to emigrate to Australia with her new husband and has been threatening to take Piers with her—with or without the court's sanction. She'd seize any motive she could to prove I was an unfit father for the boy.'

Which was why getting involved with her, Jade, was something he wanted to steer clear of, she realised with a sudden cutting poignancy, expressing her realisation aloud.

'Exactly.' Calmly Kent carried on preparing the lunch, oblivious to the sudden, injured clouding of her eyes. 'Getting myself involved with a rather infamous little socialite wouldn't do much to enhance my reputation with the courts.'

Jade's lashes came down to hide the bitter emotion that welled up within her as his remark touched a raw nerve. But then he didn't know the truth, did he? Anyway, she didn't think a job such as he had, coupled with a river home miles from anywhere, would have helped sway the court's decision in his favour either, but she said only, 'So why take the risk?'

'I was paid to—remember?' Casually he reached past her for some tomato puree on a shelf behind, the smallest glimmer of affection—warmth—which she craved from him as elusive as those evocative snatches of his cologne.

'Sorry—forgot. How stupid of me.' The acidity in her voice hid its trembling emotion as she watched the steam rising from the saucepan, because until then, angry as she was over the way he had got her drunk just so that he could get her here, she had been half hoping he'd taken such drastic action because he'd really cared about her safety. No, darn it, she thought, giving in to the inevitable, not just her safety—*her*\



But he didn't. Money was all he was interested in— as far as she was concerned, anyway and frustration, pain and resentment impelled her to throw back, 'At least now I can see why you jumped at the chance to work for my father, coming from a place like this! No wonder you wanted a taste of how the other half live— and I've certainly shown you that! I only hope you've earned enough to keep you in the way you obviously want to become accustomed, because millionaires' daughters with their lives in danger are in rather short supply!' And for the reason she'd first come looking for him, 'Do you think you could tell me where the bathroom is?' she asked, adding with a grievous acerbity, 'I suddenly feel very sick.'

She felt better after she'd freshened up, even if she did have nothing to wear but his robe! At least, though, he'd supplied her with a toothbrush, and she was thankful even for that small comfort, surprised, too, that the small space of the closet had been so well utilised as to incorporate a bath and shower—and she'd made full use of the latter.

Now, though, stepping into the corridor and feeling bolder than she had earlier, she decided to explore the confines of her prison.

The door next to hers was open anyway, a slightly smaller version of her own cabin and which, at one time, must have served as the main guest room, although Kent had utilised it as a study of sorts. A desk, littered with papers and containing a portable typewriter, a dictaphone and a brass and glass lamp, stood near the window, while a single folding berth for additional sleeping space took up the wall on its left-hand side. Books lined several shelves—dozens of them—a closer inspection revealing a good supply of travel and political volumes, dictionaries and a lot of fiction too, some printed in foreign languages—but all by the same author, row upon row of

them. Her eyes scanned the entire collection, her mouth a round O of amazement as suddenly, startlingly, it dawned.

Hearing a sound in the doorway, she swung round, her features as shocked as Kent's were inscrutable as he murmured, concerned, 'Are you all right?'

Later, she realised how long she'd been and that he'd probably come looking for her because of her earlier comment, albeit sarcastic, about feeling ill. But just then she thought he was merely referring to the shock on her face as, half dazed, she stammered, 'Y-you're Calvin Wildblood?' Author of countless crime thrillers—political dramas; of reputations brutally stripped by circumstance, social immorality, human weakness and greed. What was it he'd said? 'Nowadays I work for myself.' And how! Jade thought, totally shaken. What she hadn't digested of his work in print she had watched avidly on the small screen. Calvin Wildblood, political security man turned international bestseller, multi-millionaire, recluse. 'Why didn't you tell me?' she breathed, flabbergasted, embarrassed and annoyed that he could let her go on the way she had just now when he could afford twenty homes if he'd wanted them!

He shrugged. 'You seemed to have made up your own mind about me, and it seemed a pity to disillusion you.' Just as you did—about me, Jade thought unhappily, as he went on, 'Apart from which, the fewer people who knew, the better. As you've probably guessed, I never have had a propensity for being in the public eye.'

'As I've read!' she corrected, taking the lift of a tawny brow as his unpretentious acceptance of Jade Napier to his list of addicted fans. Calvin Wildblood, who shunned publicity so much that she hadn't been able to grasp why he'd seemed oddly familiar to her, leading her to decide that it was probably from a rare photograph she'd seen in a magazine lucky enough to have got an interview with him, rather from any past association with her uncle.

'Valerie couldn't understand that,' she came out of her reverie to hear him telling her. 'We'd known each other since we were kids and I thought we wanted the same things. It appeared we didn't. I was already established as an author while I was still working with the Branch, and our marriage seemed stable enough for the first two or three years—in fact until things really took off with the writing. Then she started wanting all the glitz and glamour that she thought being an author's wife would automatically bring, and she was disappointed when she didn't get it—so disappointed, in fact, that she went out and found someone else.'

Silently Jade sympathised, suddenly remembering his words outside that church about knowing someone a long time being no recommendation for marriage. Valerie Solomon must have been crazy, leaving a man like Kent for a more glamorous life, she thought, and felt a tightening in her stomach to be enquiring, 'And Karen doesn't mind?'

'Karen's my agent,' he surprised her by responding, so that suddenly what he had said that day when she had met the other woman about looking after her—'But not in the way you mean'—took on a totally different meaning in her mind. With a client like Calvin Wildblood, she was being looked after all right! But did that mean that he and Karen weren't intimately involved?

She quelled a rash surge of hope to ask, 'So why did you take the job of looking after me? You hardly needed the money!' She could see now, though, why he'd cost such an exorbitant sum to engage. 'And you said yourself I'm hardly worth risking losing custody of your boy for—so why put yourself in a position where you might?' Bemused, her eyes searched his, dark and hungry for some sign that he had done so because he'd felt that same devastating attraction towards her that she felt towards him, but his lashes drooped, guarding any emotion, and that twist to his lips was almost self-derisive.

'I was between books,' he explained tonelessly, 'and in need of a change,' trampling over her emotions, the need in her that was crying out to him to see the other side of her as coolly, dispassionately, he went on, 'Constant mental activity with too much of one's own company can make one feel stagnant, and your father's request seemed ultimately to...' he seemed to be searching for the right words '... have a lot going for it. Fortunately, my parents love kids and are always willing to have Piers if I'm away—and if you haven't yet grasped the picture...' there was a sudden rebuke in his voice, a flush high on his cheekbones '... this place is where I come when I need to be alone to write—but if you're wondering I've more than ample acreage for Piers to grow up in, in my own little corner of Surrey.' Which meant that he was aware of her thinking earlier, Jade thought sheepishly, and was putting her firmly in her place, and she couldn't help feeling awkwardly conscious that she would have wanted to do the same thing in his position, before he said simply, 'Now come and get something inside you. You look all in.'

'You can't keep me here,' she conveyed, watching him wash up after the tasty tagliatelle and tomato sauce he had made them for lunch. 'It—it's immoral.'

Kent pulled the plug out of the little sink beneath the galley window. 'What do you know about morality?' he queried cynically, looking down at her, still sitting there at the table in the little dinette where they had eaten, drying his hands. And without waiting for an answer, 'Here—if you want to make yourself useful you can put this away.'

Disturbed both by his remark and his cool regard, Jade snatched the margarine tub he thrust at her, her breath catching as she got up and opened the fridge. It might have been small, but it was stocked to capacity—with enough food for the two of them for at least a week!

Slamming the door, she swung round, her eyes large and accusing. 'You've thought of everything, haven't you?' she breathed.

'Just making sure you didn't want for anything,' he supplied, with a smile. 'Fortunately I have a very good friend in the village who likes to sail up with her family and stock the larder for me if she knows I'm coming,' he explained, his eyes continuing to appraise her with such lethal sensuality that she licked her lips, the vulnerability of her situation prompting her to snap,

'Then at least let me have some proper clothes!'

'Why?' he countered, with a sweeping glance down over the large, unflattering bathrobe. 'Worried that being naked under that will inflame my more fundamental instincts?'

A tingle of awareness ran down her spine, even though her head came up in an answering rebellion, and she knew he wasn't blind to the betraying glitter in her eyes, or to that evident little pulse, where his gaze rested, at the creamy hollow of her throat.

'Don't worry,' he said dismissively. 'You're quite safe. Not that it isn't tempting to give in to those natural instincts and discover the glories that all your previous lovers have unlocked, only-'

'Only what?' Jade quizzed brittly, wondering how he would react if she told him that there had only ever been one reckless hour of abandonment for her—and that regretted—as she went on, 'Only you don't fancy a lawsuit for abduction complicated by a further case of rape?'

'Rape?' Above the whistle of a kingfisher skimming the water for minnows, Kent's voice was laced with mocking scepticism. He knew how susceptible to him she was, the devastating sexual power he could wield over her, even if he believed she'd succumb in the same way to every reasonably attractive man she met. He also knew that if she brought a case against him, even for abduction, it would be her word against his. And who'd believe her, she wondered, with her

reputation—such as it was—over the higher esteem of an eminent author like Kent if he said she had come away with him willingly? To start with, Emma could vouch for the intimacy of their relationship, as he'd been so keen to point out to her earlier, and Jade was in no doubt that if she tried to make serious allegations against him her father would take Kent's side as well. .

'What makes you think I won't bring some action against you?' she returned adamantly nevertheless, fully expecting him to respond with a solid affirmation of her own thoughts. Only he didn't.

'I was hoping...' a finger was beneath her chin, forcing her insurgent features to meet the hard, impregnable strength of his '... that before we leave here I could...' he took a deep breath '... *make you see sense!*' he finished, emphasising every syllable. He strode out of the galley then, leaving Jade feeling not only defeated again, but thoroughly chastened too.

Well, perhaps he was right, she thought. Perhaps she had been incautious and foolish—but only out of sheer frustration—and now, with a small shudder, she began to wonder whether his suspicions about Juan's friends might even be right too. Even so, that didn't mean that she had to suffer the indignity of being kidnapped by him! she thought, piqued, considering this dangerous infatuation with him, and the chances—for her emotions' sake—of getting away from him. But he'd denied her her clothes, and even if she could have borrowed something of his without him knowing—found where he'd put the oars to the dinghy, or somehow got ashore under her own steam—she could only do so at night when he was asleep. And the problem there was that he was using one of the berths in the saloon, through which she'd have to pass, as the hatch to the rear deck, she'd discovered -earlier, was securely locked—and she didn't doubt that the slightest sound would wake him, bring those trouble-smelling senses of his into vigilant life.

Therefore, it seemed, the only course open to her was to sit it out, and keep her frightening emotions towards him well under control until he'd decided it was safe for her to go.

## CHAPTER SIX

PADDING barefoot into the bathroom to shower and retrieve the emerald briefs she had rinsed out the previous night, Jade studied her reflection in the mirror.

She looked better today, she thought, brushing her hair so that it fell, sleek and shining, over the shoulders of the voluminous robe. She even had colour in her cheeks. Probably because the lingering queasiness yesterday had forced her to retire early and she had slept like a log, so that now only a strong resentment remained over being held there as she followed the sound of clattering typewriter keys along the side-passage to the study.

Kent looked stunning in a pale summer shirt and light cords, the sun coming in through the window highlighting the tawny hair. He was sitting, head bowed in concentration, making some written amendment to the page in his typewriter, and Jade's stomach turned over as he enquired, without looking up, 'Did you eat your breakfast?'

She had refused to when he had brought it to her cabin earlier, saying she'd rather starve than be his captive. But the sight of the cool juice with the softly scrambled eggs, toast and coffee had proved too much for her newly restored appetite, and now she merely lifted her chin in mute rebellion as her gaze clashed with his across the desk.

'Good,' he expressed, understanding her better than she did herself, because, of course, she would have gained immense satisfaction from being able to say that she hadn't. 'Just give me five minutes and I'll be with you. I think we'd both benefit from a breath of fresh air.'

'Don't you have work to do?' she asked, with a nod at the typewriter, surprised—and pleased, if she were honest—to realise that he didn't intend burying himself in his study and leaving her to her own devices. 'Won't your *agent* disapprove?' She couldn't contain that tart



little emphasis, chiding herself for it when she saw Kent's mouth twitch in awareness.

'I told you, I'm between books at the moment,' he reiterated, tossing down his pen. 'I'm only making notes for something I'll be starting in the autumn. In fact you could be of some help to me while you're here.'

'I could what?' Jade stared down at his arrogant tawny head. 'After you've kidnapped me? Got me drunk just so that you could...' Words failed her. 'You've got a nerve!' she breathed, utterly flabbergasted.

'Haven't I?' Kent smiled, leaning back against his chair with his hands behind his head, looking up at her with a lazy, heart-stopping sensuality. 'And are you going to hold it against me for doing what I considered was best for your own good?'

'I'm not a child!' she snapped, too conscious of how tightly his shirt was pulling across his chest, showing that feathering of dark hair beneath it, and tensing as his gaze flitted cursorily over the superfluous folds of the bathrobe and he said soberly,

'No, you're not, are you?'

Totally disarmed—as she was meant to be, Jade thought, swallowing—she uttered, 'OK. What is it you want?' And a little more tightly, perching on one corner of his desk, 'What could I possibly offer the illustrious Calvin Wildblood that he doesn't already know?'

Those tawny brows lifted as he moved, bringing his arms down again with the subtle, evocative scent of his cologne. 'A woman's point of view.'

Despite everything, Jade knew a small, inexplicable thrill in being invited to help him. 'All right—shoot,' she complied, strangely stimulated.

He did, explaining the intricacies of the plot and asking how she would react in the same situation as his heroine—a young woman betrayed by a man who had married her only for the power she could bring him. She did her best to give an opinion, reminded too poignantly of herself and Russ—of his empty promises—trying to keep any emotion out of her voice. 'Perhaps she should have known better than to have got involved with him in the first place,' she appended ultimately, with a sad, ironic little smile.

'Do any of us ever?'

Outside, in the reeds, a couple of moorhens croaked quarrelsomely for a few moments, the protests gradually subsiding until all was quiet again. Of course, he must have been hurt too, Jade thought, considering his messy divorce—the legal hassle, and that strength of character that had brought him through it so that he needed no self-debasing mask to hide behind as she did, to conceal her scars from the world.

'Or is Jade Napier immune?'

His question was so penetrating that she looked quickly away, forcing a laugh, 'Fortunately! But then, as you pointed out to me after our tennis match that day, I have to be more careful than most, don't I?'

He had picked up his pen and was tapping it idly against the typewriter, the sound light and rhythmic in the sunny cabin. 'Is that why you were planning to run off with a man like Rodriguez?'

His hard accusation had Jade's breath catching in her lungs, her back stiffening. She wondered what he'd say if he knew that those plans hadn't been the means to a wildly erotic holiday with the other man,

but merely an attempt to run away from her conflicting emotions for *him*.

'I thought we were talking about fiction,' she reminded him with an affected nonchalance, about to slip off the desk.

'We were—but truth's stranger!' She gave a small cry as he caught her wrist, dragging her down towards him, her hair falling like a dark cascade over the typewriter. 'Does he turn you on?' he demanded, his grip relentless. 'Does he? Are you in love with him—or is sex the only requirement in a love-match for the girl who's used to having everything?'

The hard surface of the desk was hurting her elbow, and her features contorted with pain. 'It's hardly any of your business,' she groaned, struggling, only succeeding in loosening the robe so that it slipped provocatively off one shoulder, exposing the full, upper swell of her breast, the awareness of her own femininity against Kent's virile strength, his angry warmth and the armoured steel in the hard tendons of hand exciting her, so that she said in breathless panic, 'For heaven's sake, Kent! Isn't it enough that you've got me here against my will? Or do you plan on humiliating me further with brutality as well?'

She supposed it was the supplication in her voice that made him release her.

'You're right,' he rasped, getting up, 'it isn't my business,' those raggedly breathed words giving rise to a peculiar despondency in her as he moved lithely, silently, away from her down the passageway.

So why be affected by him like this? Hopelessly, Jade castigated herself for allowing herself to be so unutterably drawn to him. He wouldn't feel anything for her if she were marooned with him for a thousand years! she decided unhappily, almost colliding with him as he came out of the master bedroom just as she was going in.

'You'd better put them on—it's going to be hot out there,' he said abruptly, thrusting some garments into her hand before moving off towards the saloon.

Jade looked at what he had given her. It was one of his T-shirts—which was about four sizes too big! she noted with a grimace when she pulled it on. It was pleasingly cool, however, after the thick towelling robe, yet hung so loosely over the thin-striped grey boxer shorts he'd supplied her with that on a moment of ingenuity she raced through to the saloon and, finding it deserted, whipped the red plaited cords off the curtains that separated it from the dinette and galley and, using one to go around her waist, and the other to tie back her hair, she came across the carpeted saloon, up through the open doors on to the foredeck.

'Mmm, that's better,' Kent approved, stepping back on board from checking their moorings, his gaze running appreciatively over the soft white top which she knew accentuated the firm roundness of her breasts, and the shorts which, if not flattering, she thought, at least left her legs—which one reporter had once described as running up to her navel—gratifyingly exposed to the sun. 'Are you planning to utilise all my furnishings before you're through?'

Amused, Kent was referring to the curtain ties, and Jade responded with a light but careless, 'If I have to,' nursing a secret desire to pay him back for abducting her, if only by showing a blatant disregard for his precious retreat.

She had wanted to brighten herself up today, though—which was the main reason she'd taken them, after a day of feeling sick and looking her worst, even the barge and its surroundings—which she had also had little interest in yesterday—evoking her curiosity now, which she tried to hide from Kent as she glanced away from its cream and black paintwork and timber-framed windows, across the river to the main bank.

The road running parallel with it was barely more than a towpath, beyond which a field of Friesian cows munched peacefully in the early morning sun. Beyond that, the still misty landscape spread away to the lush dips and plains of what appeared to be a golf-course, the pale structure of its clubhouse with its dark tiled roof discreetly shielded by a copse of cloaking trees.

'That's where I exercise when I'm working,' Kent pointed out shrewdly. 'A round of golf between chapters helps my ideas gestate, plus the fact that it's somewhere where I can leave the car—thanks to an agreement I have with the owner—and then it's easy enough to hotfoot it here or there if I want to get out for supplies.'

It sounded idyllic, but Jade didn't tell him that, although it did account for the reason she'd seen no sign of her car on the main bank. 'How convenient for you!' she exhaled with the merest tinge of sarcasm. 'And didn't anyone think it odd that you had a lifeless female with you the other night—or were you careful not to be seen?'

'Not careful, just considerate. To both of us,' he supplemented with a wry smile. 'I brought you across here, then drove back and abandoned the car outside the clubhouse. You hardly imagined I carried you the whole distance from there, did you? It's getting on for a mile and a half!'

She wasn't sure what she had imagined, but that intimidating strength that, nevertheless, had made it possible for him to carry such a tall creature as she was without any difficulty at all sent a strange little tingle down her spine.

'And supposing I don't like the idea of having my car *abandoned*?' she challenged, emphasising his own choice of words.

'Not yours—mine,' he said succinctly, then, seeing her puzzled expression, went on, 'With those private plates of yours it would have

been like advertising to any would- be kidnapper to come and get you, which is why I took the precaution of driving to my place first from that party and using my own car to bring us down here. Yours is tucked away quite safely in my garage.'

'Thanks,' she uttered, without meaning it, his thoroughness dumbfounding her. What kidnapper would have a chance against a shrewd, calculating brain like that?

'Believe me, the last thing I wanted to do was humiliate you,' he said softly, reminding her of her earlier accusation, the look he gave her so sensually disturbing that she was grateful for the distraction of a reed bunting darting out of the rushes by the starboard bank, its black head and distinctive white collar holding her attention as it streaked off along the river, bringing her gaze ultimately to the misty spire of a distant church in a village way, way downstream. 'Would you like to see the garden?' Laughingly now, he gestured to the little island.

Carelessly, Jade nodded. 'Why not?' After all, what had she to lose? Nothing, she acknowledged some time afterwards, but very much to gain, because the island was a natural haven for the river wildlife.

A pair of brown ducks waddled, protesting, out of their path as Kent helped her ashore, and a small water- vole, disturbed by their presence, streaked out of the reeds away from them, its shiny black body moving smoothly across the water to the opposite bank.

'Somehow I don't think we're very welcome,' Jade suggested more light-heartedly now, feeling the soft grass beneath the glossy yellow cups of marsh marigold as a cool sensuality beneath her feet.

'Most of the birds won't mind—as long as they see you're keeping your distance,' he told her from experience, suddenly making her own life—the socialising and the parties—seem no less than superficial compared with this natural sanctuary, so that she found herself

envying him this wonderful retreat, away from the rest of the world, that he could escape to as and when he wished.

'Well, not entirely,' he said when she expressed her view over this last point, while keeping her sudden deductions about her own life well concealed. 'I do have Piers to think about.'

Of course—his son, she was reminded, wondering about this little boy who had such a caring hulk of principles for a father, when, from behind, Kent's arm suddenly slid around her middle, stopping her in her tracks, and in a low, warning voice he said, 'Now that's one creature you would be advised not to go near. Respect that lady's privacy and she'll be only too glad to respect yours.'

Jade caught her breath, not only from being held so close to him, but also from the sight of the beautiful, snowy mute swan he was pointing out, sitting on an enormous clump of water weed, proudly incubating her eggs.

'She's late this year,' Kent whispered against her hair. 'She's usually hatched her young a month earlier than this, but if we keep at a respectable distance she won't feel threatened.'

'You mean the way I do?' It slipped out before she could stop it, her gasp restrained, so as not to alarm the swan, when his arm tightened, drawing her back against him.

'Do you really feel threatened, Jade?' His breath was a caress against her skin, his voice—his warmth—so shatteringly intimate that she turned her head in unwitting invitation, craving the feel of his lips against her throat, for him to touch her, while at the same time praying desperately that he wouldn't.

And her prayers, it seemed, were answered when his arm fell away from her, and he said only, 'Let's leave her in peace, shall we?'

So why this aching disappointment? she thought, retreating as silently as he did, utterly abashed when he advised in raggedly admonishing tones, 'And if you don't want to find yourself sharing my bed tonight, then stop giving me the signals. Much as I'd like to make love to you, I'd prefer that pleasure when you aren't in a position to make the excuse of a modern Sabine woman out of it.'

Well, hadn't she as good as said that yesterday? Jade reminded herself when his words stung, along with the knowledge of her own weakness in still wanting a man who could treat her like some medieval female with no rights just because he was being paid to.

'I wasn't aware I was giving you any signals,' she retaliated in an attempt to save face, which was a lie, and he knew it, she thought, as his gaze played cursorily over her betraying breasts beneath the soft, all-too-revealing cotton.

'No?' was all he said sagely so that, embarrassed, Jade moved away, finding a clear, sunny spot on the other side of a clump of bushes, dropping down on to the grass, gazing absently upstream.

The sun was burning the mist off the river and already the church spire in the distance had become clearly visible, like a slender grey finger touching the perfect blue of the sky. The faint scent of willowherb reached her nostrils, its tall pink flowers stirring gently near by. A cow lowed in the field opposite and the murmur of a train cutting its way somewhere across the Hampshire countryside came distantly on the breeze.

'Don't burn.' Suddenly Kent was on his haunches beside her. 'I know it's only May, but we are having a heatwave and there are still plenty of ultraviolet rays up there to damage that lovely pale skin.'

And he had made sure beforehand of securing the right protection for it, she realised, resentful yet unavoidably impressed when he tossed



her a tube of high-factor cream, suffering a complexity of emotions when he stretched his heavy frame out beside her as she started applying the cream liberally to her limbs. A man who clearly found it easy to relax—and whom she could so easily have, relaxed with if she hadn't been so affected by his sheer physical magnetism, she thought, gazing thoughtfully out across the spreading green blanket of the golf-course to a red flag shimmering in the rising waves of heat. She'd probably discovered more about him here, during the past two days, she calculated, amazed, than she had in the whole time he'd been in her father's employ.

'I didn't realise you played golf,' she said, her pulse suddenly leaping from the studied casualness with which his gaze moved over her glistening legs. 'Do you have a handicap?'

'Only you at the moment.' Amusement trickled through his words, bringing her gaze to the mocking grey of his.

'It was your choice,' she retorted, replacing the cap on the tube and setting it down beside her, stretching out on her side now with her head propped up by an elbow, her attention caught by the translucent blue of a dragonfly as it hovered, undecided, over the willowherb.

'Yes... it was.'

Something in the way he said that made her look at him quickly—query that enigmatic darkening of his eyes. Was he really saying that he *wanted* her with him... ?

Trying to stem the sudden urgency in her blood she swiftly pushed all fanciful thoughts about his motives aside. He'd said himself that he hadn't done it for anything but the money—a simple diversion from the pressures of his work.

'So you're stuck with me—and now I'm cramping your style. Good,' she laughed with provocative satisfaction and, realising his intention,

rolled away from him before his hand could meet its target, every nerve pulsing with a reckless excitement as she heard his own sensual laughter on the air.

If he touched her...

Lying on her back, she closed her eyes against the humiliating thought of surrender to him. A man who, in effect, was holding her against her will. However strong this infatuation with him, nothing could detract from that. And despite that enduring self-restraint of his she didn't doubt for a moment that if he knew how much she wanted him propinquity alone would be enough to persuade him into taking her, and without any effect to his emotions whatsoever. But she didn't want to think about that and, forcing it out of her mind, rather tremulously she asked, 'Do you really not have a handicap-seriously?'

'Not any more.'

She turned her head in a swath of dark silk. 'You're getting to be a bore, do you know that?' she breathed with an ironic twist to her lips. 'I might have guessed! So you're very, very good.'

'Not really,' Kent countered with an unassuming smile. 'It's surprising how much practice one can get in when one's suffering from a good dose of writer's block.'

'I don't believe it!' Jade uttered with an incredulous little laugh.

'You'd better.' Again that unpretentious self-mockery. 'Have you ever played?'

The dry grass rustled beneath her as she shrugged. 'I've tried it once or twice, but I'm afraid my swing's as undisciplined as my backhand.'

'Hmm.' He wasn't disputing that, she decided, before he added almost casually, 'Remind me to give you a game some time.'

Some time? Like when? While he was keeping her successfully under his guardianship here? Or did he mean some time never? A promise for the future—already broken, because after this job was over for him he didn't intend ever seeing her again?

Stupidly, tears pricked her eyelids and, staring up at the blurred blue canopy of the sky, she whispered, 'I'll hold you to that,' pretending because he was, because, crazily, it hurt too much to admit that he'd never allow himself to become serious with the type of girl he fully believed her to be.

After that she feigned sleep, keeping her breathing even and regular, allowing the herby scents, the sun and the riverside sounds to soothe her tumultuous emotions. At some point she was aware of Kent moving, and tensed as she heard a twig snap, keeping still as a statue until she heard the more distant, softer sound of his rubber soles meeting the polished wood of the deck. And sleep must have really claimed her then, because the next thing she knew she was waking to the sound of strange squeaks and rustlings, to find Kent kneeling beside her in nothing but a pair of hip-hugging blue shorts, unpacking a wicker hamper.

'What's this?' she laughed tentatively, trying not to notice his tautly fleshed body as she sat up and saw the white cloth spread out on the grass with wine and glasses and a bowl of crisp, moistly dressed salad.

'Room service,' was his laconic response, and then, as if to make a point, 'I thought it best to keep you in the manner in which you're accustomed. I wouldn't want to give you cause for any unnecessary complaint.'

Jade didn't say anything. What was there to say? she thought. That she'd have traded her privileged existence for the peace and perfection of his any day? she confided to herself, refusing to let his cynicism spoil what promised to be a delicious lunch.

It was. The grilled chicken portions he had brought out were as tender and succulent as they looked, the bread rolls soft and still warm, but when he went to fill her glass with the white wine she shook her head.

'You must be joking!' she breathed. After the other night she doubted whether she'd ever be able to face alcohol again!

'I thought not.' Calmly Kent filled his own glass and returned the bottle to its cooler, reaching round to pull something else out of the hamper.

Again, he'd thought of everything, Jade acknowledged, watching the clear mineral water tumble from its bottle and fizz into her glass—as much in command over a simple picnic as he had been the other night when he had employed that ruthless intellect and determination to foil her attempt to run away with Juan.

Afterwards, she couldn't recollect precisely what they talked about during that meal, only that any tension between them seemed to ease with a mutual appreciation of their surroundings—of the day. And if she found it difficult sometimes concentrating on something Kent was saying, then he shouldn't play host to such lethal magnetism, should he? she justified when, not for the first time, her gaze was trapped by the smouldering directness of his. 'I'm going for a swim.' Already he was on his feet, bringing Jade's gaze skittering over his wide-shouldered torso, over the solid lines of his muscular thighs.

'Won't it be cold?' she asked, surprised.

And was made to feel stupidly naive when that hot masculine gaze burned down over her body and with a grimace he said, 'I hope so, Jade. For both our sakes, I sincerely hope so.'

She flushed, but merely laughed up at him. Which was the sort of reaction he would have expected from a girl with her alleged experience, she guessed, staggered to realise the effect she was having upon him as she watched him plunge into the gin-clear river.

'Brrrr!'

Jade laughed out loud as he surfaced, shuddering. 'Serves you right!' she called out, her laughter unsympathetic.

'Any more of that and you'll be joining me!' he threatened with wry humour as he began slicing through the water, his powerful movements sending angry ripples into the reeds.

She laughed at the idle threat—though a little *frisson* arrowed through her. Was she really foolish enough to want to incite some sensual game with him?

The day was blistering, though, and after a while Jade found the temptation to join him too great to resist, and within minutes was slipping into the water of her own accord.

'Brave girl.' Kent was level with her as she gasped her shock from the stinging cold of the water. 'I must hand it to you—you're game for anything, aren't you, sweetheart? And I thought girls like you only got themselves dishevelled if there was an army of servants waiting around to make amends.'

'Well, you thought wrong, didn't you?' she returned, but with little antagonism, because she felt surprisingly good, mentally and physically—which hardly made sense, she thought, when she'd been carted off out of her own environment, against her will!

'Obviously.' Kent's mouth compressed with unconcealed approval. 'Have you any more surprises for me, Jade Napier? Or are you going to reveal them little by little—like rose petals charmed by the sun?'

'Oh, very poetic.' She sent him a withering glance and swam briskly away from him, catching his soft laughter as she struck out with only one aim in mind now—that of getting warm.

It didn't take long. Nor was it too long before she realised the disadvantages of swimming in the Hampshire Avon as she felt something wrap itself like clinging tentacles around her legs—around one arm—hampering her movements, so that, unable to shrug it off, she pulled herself, frustrated and gasping, on to the main bank.

'Good gracious! Whatever happened to you?' Kent was laughing as he hauled himself out beside her and started helping her to extricate herself from the tenacious green strands. 'You look like a water baby. Sorry, darling, I forgot to tell you that there was a lot of weed in this river.'

'Thanks,' she breathed with tremulous sarcasm, because Kent's hand was resting casually on her shoulder, making her pulses quiver with awareness as he picked off the remaining weed with the other, his body gleaming bronze in the sun.

'I also forgot to tell you that washing those curtain ties isn't recommended. You've put a great pattern on that T-shirt,' he drawled, amused.

Jade followed his gaze downwards to her midriff, only to discover that he was right. The plaited cord had run, so that there were now haphazard red streaks all around the middle of the white shirt.

'Oh, my goodness! It wasn't any particular favourite of yours, was it?' she giped after her initial, shocked reaction, secretly pleased at having ruined his T-shirt— and possibly his tie-backs as well—after

what he'd done to her, so that she uttered carelessly, 'It was only a shapeless old thing anyway, wasn't it?'

'It was virtually brand new, and you know it.' There was a heart-quickenning promise of retribution in his voice that, despite his smile, should have warned her. 'And I'm sure Karen wouldn't appreciate your description of her birthday gift. I believe she went to a lot of trouble selecting that little piece of designer wear.'

That hurt—unbelievably!—and heedlessly she snapped, 'Tough,' suffering agonies of torment as she plunged back into the water, Kent's muttered,

'You little...!' and his echoing plunge assuring her that he had taken enough and was intending to give back as good as she had given him.

Jade shrieked as he caught her just as she was scrambling "back on to the island, half laughing, half protesting as he pulled her down on to the sweet warm grass, pinning her there with his body.

'Oh, yes, my love, we've been here before, haven't we?' he laughed, not cruelly—not in anger like that time he'd chased after her in the pool. This time he'd been driven by something much more basic and fundamental, and which she had incited with her teasing, inviting it now against the conflict of her will as she welcomed the devastating urgency of his kiss.

She sighed her acceptance deep into his mouth, moving convulsively beneath his crushing weight, answering the message his body was conveying so flagrantly to hereto conquer, to penetrate and possess.

'Oh, God,' he groaned, no more in control than she was, his skin flushed, his eyelids heavy with the weight of his passion—his desire mirrored in her own eyes, in her tumescent, aching breasts beneath the clinging wet shirt. Sojnehow he had unfastened the cord around her waist, allowing his hands unfettered access to her body, his

fingers moving surprisingly gently over the smooth satin of her waist and ribcage, finding her breasts to elicit a shuddering groan of need from deep in her throat.

Dear heaven, she wanted him! she thought torturedly, caressing the warm, wet velvet of his skin. She wanted to kiss him. Touch him. Urgently her teeth bit into the damp, hard flesh of his shoulder, her nails dragging provocatively down the erotic, heated satin of his back. She wanted to...

She drew in a trembling breath, shifting her position so that her lips could follow the path of her hands to the dark band spanning that firm waist, feeling the muscles of his abdomen flex, hearing him catch his breath before he pushed her, with an almost anguished groan, back on to the grass, moulding her to him, caressing her, tasting the damp, sweet arousal of her body.

'Kent, please...' she begged, because suddenly he had stopped and she couldn't bear it, needing him, craving the ultimate fulfilment that only his possession of her would bring. 'Please don't stop.' It was a small, agonised plea which he cruelly ignored, easing himself up to study her flushed face with cool, assessing eyes.

'And if I make love to you here—now—what then? A moral, if not legal accusation hereafter that it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't brought you here? Or would it qualify me as your latest *affaire de coeur* until something more fascinating comes along?'

'Don't.' Her breasts lifted on a sob, a small sound against the gentle stirring of the reeds beside them. 'You don't understand,' she breathed huskily.

'Don't I?' She didn't think she had ever seen him look so harrowed, those strong features etched with deep slashes of something resembling pain. 'I'm trying to, Jade. I've been trying to understand



the complexities of your emotional make-up since the day I first spoke to you outside that church. Wanting you—and knowing that if I give in to this crazy weakness I'll just be one in a long line...' His breath came raggedly from his lungs. 'Well, why not?' His arm slid under her, pulling her roughly against him. 'If I'm to suffer eternal hell for wanting you then I may as well go the whole hog and be hanged!'

That deep voice trembled beneath the burden of his frustration; nevertheless his meaning was clear enough.

'No, Kent...' Jade shuddered violently as the wisp of emerald beneath her shorts yielded too easily to his seeking hands, and suddenly she was tugging her shirt down, lines of anguished desire graven on her face. 'Kent, please... not like this,' she begged, realising now that whatever he believed about her the outcome would be the same, and yet she couldn't bear the thought of his making love to her in anger, despising her as he did.

'Why not? Shy?' he taunted, an ironic smile mocking her attempts to conceal the betraying arousal of her breasts. 'Modesty's a little out of character, isn't it, my love?'

'You don't understand. There's only ever been-'

She choked back her rash admission, realising the conclusions he would draw from it.

'Only ever been what?' he insisted, those thick brows knitting, his arm flexing like strengthened steel under her back.

'Russ.' His tenacious will alone seemed to drag it out of her. 'And only on one occasion—a few days before we broke up. There's never been anyone else.'

'What?' For a man who was adept at concealing his emotions, Kent looked considerably stunned. 'You mean you're trying to tell me it's

all a front? That you're really all lace and purity behind that discreditable little name you've carved out for yourself? Come off it, Jade! I'd really love to believe that of you, sweetheart—but a girl who gets herself in the papers as a regular *femme fatale* with more conquests than Napoleon, and winds up half-naked at parties, doesn't usually carry away any blue ribbons for propriety! What happened with you and that fiance of yours, anyway? Couldn't he stand the pace?"

She flinched from the raw accusation in his voice, but nevertheless he was still being kind, she thought, in not spelling it out. He knew as well as anyone of the speculation surrounding her broken engagement, her fiance's failure to deny the rumours that it was on grounds of her unreasonable behaviour following that accident, only concealing his own calculated reasons for jilting her.

'There was only one party like you're referring to, Kent—and it wasn't mine.' Her voice was husky, barely above a whisper.

'Go on,' he pressed, when she failed to expand immediately, puzzlement lining his strong features.

'Oh, there have been lots of *parties*' Hadn't she needed them to hide her trampled pride behind? 'But never any like that one. Dad was away as usual and I'd been spending the weekend with Roberta. I drove back quite late, and Jeremy had a houseful of people. I didn't know at the time, but he'd been squandering his allowance- gambling, he owed some rather dubious people a lot of money, and a couple of them turned up that night, wanting him to settle or get involved in something... I don't know...some illegal business—and when he refused they started threatening him.

'I wouldn't even have been downstairs if I'd been able to sleep, but there was so much noise going on, I decided to go down for a swim in the indoor pool we used to have then. I couldn't even get to it. There

were people everywhere—all pretty far gone with drink and trying to get me to join in—and someone tried to tug my robe off, and nearly my bikini with it.

'When I managed to get into the drawing-room, I found Jeremy there in a terribly frightened state, and he told me then about the debt he was in. He was scared those riien he owed the money to would come back, so I persuaded him to let me drive him to a hotel for the night. By the time we were on the road, though, I decided it would be best to let Dad handle it as he was only in 'Birmingham on a conference.

'When Jeremy knew where I was taking him, he was so worried about what Dad would say—that he might cut off his allowance altogether—that he tried to stop me. He grabbed the wheel and the car veered off and hit that bridge, and that pedestrian suffered shock and minor grazes. Then that photograph of me appeared in the papers making it look like a direct result of that party—a marvellous headline for the gossip columnists—although the fact that I hadn't been drinking wasn't reported for three days, and then it only appeared on page five! I couldn't do much without making things look bad for Jeremy,' she finished with a poignant stab of emotion, remembering Rufus Napier's insistence that she didn't add further disgrace to the family name.

'And when you told your... boyfriend...' Kent spoke the noun with almost detrimental emphasis '...he didn't believe you?' There was such a mixture of puzzling disbelief in his face, she wasn't sure whether he did altogether himself.

She laughed, a short, humourless little sound. 'I didn't tell him,' she uttered, and saw incredulity flare in Kent's eyes. 'Believe it or not, Kent, the reason he left me had nothing to do with any opinion he'd formed about me because of my so-called behaviour. That was only a convenient excuse, and I gave him the satisfaction of letting everyone believe it. It was easier than telling the whole world the truth.'

He had shifted on to his side, his arm supporting his head. 'Which was?' he pressed, the line deepening between his eyebrows.

She didn't want to tell him, but the words just kept pouring out of her. 'That Dad said he was just a gold- digger and said that he'd do everything to stop us marrying. When I refused to believe it he said he'd offer to buy Russ out of my life and we'd see. He said he'd proveto me that Russ was the type who'd trade anything as long as the cheque was high enough—even me,' she said, the pain of that first bitter lesson cutting through the layers of her emotional scars. She took a deep breath, searing and uneven. 'Russ was gone before the ink was even dry.'

'So your father was right,' Kent said quietly.

Strangely, she hadn't consciously acknowledged it before, too hurt to see Rufus Napier as anything other than the destroyer of her happiness—guiltier even than the selfish, mercenary Ross. Yet, incredibly, even *his* cruel betrayal had lost most of its poignancy now.

'So it's all a big act?' Kent's tone was no less than angry. 'The sex-kitten charade. To get even with Russ— and every other darn man who dares come within a yard of that inveigling femininity.'

'That's not true!'

'Isn't it?' His tone conveyed otherwise. 'Either that or some warped way of punishing yourself for being weak enough to fall in love—or your father for failing to give you the love you thought he was duty bound to supply— or even both.'

That wasn't true. Was it? reluctantly Jade began to wonder, unhappy with the way Kent was forcing her to see things about herself, things she wasn't sure she liked.

'So why tell me?' His tone was gentler now above the splash of a fish jumping in the river, though his face was an inscrutable mask—and her answer came from nowhere, without question, without dispute.

*Because I love you!* It throbbed from the depths of her being—a soul-wrenching admission that shook her with its intensity—but she couldn't tell him as much, murmuring only, tremulously, 'I—I thought you were going to rape me.'

He swore explicitly. 'Do you really think that I'd-?' He broke off, breathing hard.

No, she didn't, Jade acknowledged privately. He had weaknesses, it was true. But mishandling a vulnerable female wasn't one of them.

'You little fool,' she thought he muttered under his breath, as, bending down, he brushed her lips gently with his, the gesture so tender that she shivered and murmured her tortured desire, needing his loving, his arms around her now, more than ever. But with a catch of his breath he drew away, saying almost tonelessly, 'You're getting cold. You'd better get inside and have a warm shower.'

And that said it all, Jade thought abjectly, as she complied with his suggestion and went back on board, trying to ignore the significance of this latest rejection. She couldn't, though, plagued by the thought that, while he might have made love to her when he'd believed her to be as sexually sophisticated as himself, that raging self-discipline of his would never allow him to seduce an inexperienced little fraud like she was just for sheer gratification—because that was all it would have been—for him anyway! she accepted torturously, his final action proving it more positively than if he'd written it in smoke signals across the sky!

## CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN she came out of the shower, Jade found Kent carrying out some maintenance in the engine-room.

'Is there anything I can help you with?' she volunteered tentatively, feeling, as his cool gaze flicked over the clean casual shirt and shorts he had given her, that she had revealed far too much of herself to him that afternoon.

'Not unless you want to get yourself dirty.' He gave her a wan smile. 'There's no problem here. Just making a routine check. Thanks anyway,' he said, examining hoses on the engine, checking pumps and tightening the odd nut.

'Do you ever cruise on her?' she asked, wondering why he seemed so cool towards her—so aloof.

'Hardly ever.' He was carefully oiling something with the know-how of the experienced barge-man. 'She's only ever off her moorings if I want to take on water and more fuel. She's just a place to work uninterrupted, which I find a boon when I'm plotting out a new book.'

'How long does it take you?' Suddenly she wanted to learn everything about his fascinating work—how he found his ideas, did his research, and in doing so she saw that cool, detached facade of his slipping as the minutes ticked by, and it wasn't until he consulted his watch that they realised over an hour had passed, so that when he suggested that they have something to eat she happily agreed.

'Boat maintenance is hungry work!' she joked, almost forgetting that she had no choice about being there with him, though she experienced a sudden tightening of her stomach when he responded lightly with,

'In that case come and help me get dinner.'

In the galley, watching him take provisions from the cupboards and the well-stocked fridge, Jade started as that deep voice was suddenly recommending, 'Perhaps while I'm doing the main course you could rustle up a hot sweet.'

At her sides, her hands clenched into tense little balls. 'I can't cook,' she admitted, her expression sheepish. And catching his imprecation, his look of utter disbelief, 'Well, I've never had to!' she justified emphatically.

'Then it's time someone taught you,' was all he said, and he proceeded to do just that, so that together they produced a nourishing, if not entirely presentable meal. It was her tense awareness of him, though, Jade blamed for the way her souffle sank, an inability to keep her mind on what she was doing because that lethal magnetism of his disturbed her too much in the intimate, confined space of the galley. And she felt it in him too—that sexual tension—saw it in his eyes every time their glances accidentally clashed, heard it in the rasp of his breath from even the most innocuous physical contact between them, which was why he became the cold, indifferent stranger again as soon as the evening set in, excusing himself on the grounds that he had work to do in the study.

Or maybe he just didn't want her company, Jade thought achingly, now that he'd ruled her out as a suitable candidate for his bed, going up on deck to bring in the clothes they had been swimming in, lying there on the locker—dried and stiff now in the setting sun. Then, returning through the saloon, she refastened the curtains with the rather sad-looking tie-backs, and took herself off to bed.

The room was hot and full of people. Kent was dancing with her, telling her that he didn't love her, and yet he wouldn't let her go, and all around them champagne corks were popping—louder and louder...

Suddenly she was fully awake, recognising the sound now as the noisy squabbling of coots, the bright sun streaming through the floral curtains, combined with a restless night's sleep, telling her, even before she looked at her watch, that she had finally slept deeply and late.

Up and fastening her robe, a glance into the saloon dispelled the notion that Kent might have been lying in himself, but the boat's unusual silence, after a swift check of his study and the engine-room, brought Jade to the conclusion that he had to be outside.

Going back across the saloon, however, she found the glass-panelled doors to the foredeck locked, and mystification turned to annoyance as she looked out of the window on the port side and saw the rowing boat dragged up on to the main bank. So he'd gone off somewhere early—and locked her in!

Still piqued, she was making herself a cup of coffee, listening to the portable radio in the galley, when she felt the movement of the boat, heard footsteps coming aboard, then the saloon doors being unlocked.

'You\*didn't have to lock me in-' Halfway across the saloon before he was even inside, Jade stopped short, realising he wasn't alone.

'Piers, meet Jade,' he was saying to the little boy who had scampered in ahead of him. 'Jade, this is Piers, my son.'

He was such a perfect replica of his father—of how Kent must have looked when he himself had been eight— that a lump came to her throat, her hair falling forward as she stooped to say smilingly, 'Pleased to meet you, Piers.'

Blue-grey eyes smiled back with a curious appraisal, and with tongue-in-cheek amusement the boy observed rather diffidently, 'Your dressing-gown's too big.'



'Yes,' Jade acknowledged. Then with a savaging glance at Kent, 'I always did like the loose look,' she appended accusingly in his direction. How could he bring someone here when she didn't have any clothes? she fumed. Even if it was only his son!

'Come down to the bedroom.' There was authority in Kent's voice as he addressed her. 'And you...' he ran a paternal hand through the little boy's tawny hair '...will find a nicely chilled Coke in the fridge.'

'Goody!'

While the boy scampered off, across to the galley, Jade did as Kent had instructed, rounding on him as he followed her into the master cabin, bathed gold where the sun struck its oak-lined walls.

'You didn't have to lock me in!' she breathed, as he pushed the door behind him, wings of angry colour stealing across her cheeks. 'Did you really think I'd try to get away with the only boat out of here on the other side of the river? All right, I might not want to be here, but I'm not too wrapped up in swimming ashore either— not to mention travelling all the way back to London in wet clothes! You had no right to treat me like some- some criminal-'

'I'm sorry.' His cool interjection stemmed her tirade in mid-flow. 'I was thinking more of your security while I was gone rather than any specific intention to keep you in,' he stated dispassionately, dropping the white polythene bag she had only just realised he was carrying down on to the bed. The name of some boutique was scrawled boldly across it. 'I went out early to get Piers and popped into the village on my way back. I thought you might be glad of something feminine to wear.'

And as usual he'd forgotten nothing, Jade discovered, as she pulled out shorts and a skirt, flattering cotton tops and a pair of canvas shoes suitable for scrambling about the boat. He had even included some

underwear- two camisoles and briefs in matching satin, cream with a scalloped edging of coffee lace.

'Thanks,' she muttered, looking at the labels, then, glancing up, said surprised, 'How did you know my size?'

He studied her with that amused, intelligent perception. 'A day in the West End with you and any man would have your statistics printed on his mind for life!'

Of course. The reminder made her smile. 'So the lesson wasn't truly wasted, was it?' she said with mock-triumph, embarrassed to remember how, even then, her attempts to make him suffer had only rebounded on herself. 'You didn't drive all the way to Surrey and back... ?' She was measuring a pair of shorts against her hips, her sentence petering out as she considered what time he must have left. Wasn't that where he said he and Piers lived?

'No. I didn't want to leave you on your own for that length of time, so I telephoned his grandfather last night to see if he and Mother were coming down south for the weekend, as they do quite often, so that they could meet me at the golf club with Piers this morning.'

'I see.' Jade's response was automatic as she tried the skirt against her—a floating white creased cotton that she would have chosen herself if she had seen it in the shop. 'You telephoned...' She looked up at him, puzzled, trying to recollect at what time he might have gone ashore the previous day to enable him to make a phone call. But he hadn't...

'I keep a portable in my briefcase.' Calmly he answered her indignant, unspoken question. 'Just in case of an emergency.'

And this had been one—instantly it dawned—finding himself alone with a girl to whom he was undeniably attracted, but with whom he didn't want now to risk winding up in bed. So what better way to

remove temptation than with the presence of a third party? And for the same reason he had refrained from making love to her yesterday—because he'd suddenly realised she was the type of girl who didn't want sex without emotional commitment, and he didn't care enough about her for that!

'How lucky for you,' she uttered tonelessly, cursing the needles of anguish that made it impossible then for her even to challenge him over lying about the phone.

As it turned out, however, little Piers Solomon was a pleasure to have around, and his company helped to alleviate the tension between her and Kent, so that the three of them seemed to get on with remarkable accord.

'You're fun,' the little boy praised endearingly that evening, when the two of them were alone together in the galley. Jade could hear Kent wielding a small hammer in the study, making some repair to the single bunk that Piers would be using while he was there.

Jade smiled as he sneaked a crumb from one of the small, oddly shaped rock-cakes she had attempted to make that afternoon, feeling the need of a close family relationship so strongly that she had to shut her mind to it before it could take a hold.

'Not like Auntie Karen.' Instantly Jade's thoughts came winging back to reality. 'She never lets me help her when she's in the kitchen—and she's always trying to make me stay and play in my cabin so that she can be on her own to talk to Daddy.'

Jade wasn't quite sure what happened next, only that the contents of the frying-pan she was clutching now lay in a sticky heap on the stove, the extent of her mishap only sinking in when she heard Piers calling proudly, 'Daddy, Jade tried to toss a pancake and some of it's stuck on the ceiling!'

She was busy scraping it off with a spatula when Kent appeared along the passageway, the day's growth shading his jaw and the casually buttoned shirt lending him an image of such relaxed sensuality that Jade's pulses throbbed with awareness even through her red-faced embarrassment.

'I don't know how it happened!' she bluffed, because, of course, she did. She had been wondering if 'Aunty Karen'-actually slept here with Kent, and her aggressive response to it had been to toss the pancake too high.

'I've heard of art deco, but you've really added something extra.' His grin as he stood surveying her efforts to clear up the mess was as boyish as the giggling Piers's. 'I think pancakes might have been a bit too adventurous for a novice cook!' he laughed. 'Here, let me do that.'

Jade's ribs contracted from the warm hands that were suddenly on her waist, moving her out of the way, her nostrils picking up the slight musk of his heated skin.

'Now a joke's a joke, but that's taking it far enough!' He was catching the handle of the frying-pan, pushing it back on the stove, away from Piers, who was tossing a make-believe pancake, and who became surprisingly quiescent, Jade noted, impressed, after that firm reprimand by his father.

'It's also dangerous, too, to play with things on the stove,' she explained gently to the boy, admiring Kent's control over his son, coupled with that sense of fun and caring.

'Does that go for me too?' He was grinning again as he reached for one of the little cakes on the wire rack beside the stove, and which he sampled deliciously in two or three large bites. 'Mmm... you're really getting a flair for this,' he approved, swallowing the last of his cake,

and was reaching for another until the spatula Jade was using now to scrape the top of the stove rapped lightly over his knuckles.

'Don't get ideas!' she laughed, blue eyes clashing playfully with grey, colour rushing to her cheeks when suddenly she realised the false implication of her words.

'Why not?' Kent said softly, lips quirked in teasing response.

Jade's heart thudded. He was only playing with her, it took an immense effort of will to point out to herself before she dared to do anything foolish like hope, trying to answer light-heartedly with, 'Because you're far too mature for me.' And he had only to make something of that modulation in her voice to know that she was lying, she thought hopelessly, but nevertheless added with guarded flippancy, 'I prefer younger boys. Sorry, Kent.'

'Like me! Like me!' Jade was both surprised and touched when Piers caught her arm, snuggling up to her, and her heart went out to him as it struck her that, fortunate though he was in having a father like Kent, he must still, subconsciously, have craved a mother's affection. And the fact that she'd made a firm friend of the child was, flatteringly, without doubt.

'I see the two of you have successfully joined forces against me,' Kent joked, amused. But was that approval in his eyes? Jade wondered, reading something else there too—some hot, glittering emotion that told her that if Piers weren't there...

She trembled from that silent, sensual message, a reckless excitement coursing through her veins. But, of course, Piers was there—and for that very reason, she reminded herself piercingly, glad herself that he was because she wouldn't be in danger of revealing her feelings for Kent so easily as long as the child was around.

The heatwave continued in a sultry, starry night, followed by another blue-gold dawn, a day spent pretty much the same as the previous one, Jade reflected serenely; taking Piers on to the island to look at the waterfowl; getting absorbed in the stimulating exercise of discussing ideas for one of Kent's new books, and knowing a blood-stirring pleasure when he praised her tentative suggestions; finding it easy to talk to him, even with Piers around, because the little boy clearly had his father's initiative and could amuse himself happily on his own.

Coming ashore this morning, however, near the spot where the swans were nesting, Piers, who had crept cautiously ahead, suddenly gave a little gasp and, running back through the trees, grabbed Kent's arm with a breathless, 'Daddy—come and look!'

Kent exchanged a wry glance with Jade, even that private little gesture sending warmth flooding through her veins as Piers urged them on over the short grass.

'Look! They've hatched!' he exclaimed in an excited whisper, pointing to the clump of weed where yesterday only one graceful mute swan had sat proudly incubating her eggs and where now four tiny grey heads peeped shyly out from beneath her protective, snowy feathers.

'Oh, Kent! Aren't they lovely?'

'Aren't they?' he smiled, creeping closer for a better view, as enthralled with the cygnets as both she and Piers were. 'Feeling broody, Jade?'

She glanced up from the touching maternal scene, meeting the mocking laughter in his eyes.

'What's "broody", Daddy?' Piers, quick to latch on to a new word, was asking innocently, and from out of the corner of her eye she saw the man's mouth pull down in wry contemplation.

'Something to do with ducks—particularly baby ones,' Kent drawled with clever ambiguity, that undertone of soft laughter directed at her with his reminder of the conversation they had had the day she had dropped her earring in that other river.

For a moment she didn't know where to look, nonplussed by the sudden vibrant impulses that seemed to be sizzling on the air. Therefore she was almost relieved when Piers, moving forward to get a closer look at the cygnets, broke the spell by inducing a strong, restraining hand to come down on his shoulder with, 'That's far enough, son,' just as the proud, feathered father arched its wings in an intimidating warning to keep away.

'You get on well with Piers, don't you?' she remarked, watching him poking about with a stick in the reeds while they lounged, keeping an eye on him, a short distance away.

Kent smiled. 'He's a good kid. He's taken well to you too, although he's never hit it off in quite the same way with-'

Jade wondered why he didn't finish. Didn't he want her to know that he brought his lovely agent here? she thought, turning away so that the hair falling loosely around her face hid her tortured expression.

'You're going away soon, aren't you?' The words were out before she could stop them, and she stared rigidly at the river and the rise of a hungry trout, hoping he hadn't detected that despondency in her voice.

'Yes, next month,' he said. 'I hate these promotional affairs, but unfortunately it's something I have to do to be fair to both my agent and my publisher. I did, however, manage to get my own way about

not staying over for some big literary reception at the beginning of August. It's the school summer holidays, and I've arranged things so that I can fly home around mid-July to spend most of them with Piers.'

The^ .ripple of something in the reeds concealed the sharp breath she inhaled. 'Do you always try to be with him?' she asked.

Kent shrugged. 'Except in very exceptional circumstances,'-\*he told her. 'No job is worth sacrificing one's family for—but all too often these days it's down to standard of living versus quality of life—and unfortunately quality of life usually loses. The only other thing that might keep me away from him is my research, and then, if circumstances permit, as often as I can I try and take him with me.'

Lucky Piers, Jade considered almost enviously, remembering herself around the same age, inconsolable because her father was going away and wouldn't take her with him; trying to understand when he said she was growing up and would be happier with her friends—only she wasn't—and the following day he'd sent her a designer doll from Paris.

Part of her still ached with that seven-year-old's desolation, and she glanced up, her eyes unintentionally mirroring the gaping chasm of emptiness she felt inside.

'Jade? what is it?' Kent asked softly.

Oh, God, how I love him! she sobbed inwardly, lying down and closing her eyes against the gentle discernment of his, as though that was the only way she could keep the secret inside her.

'What is it, darling?' How could she bear it when he used that term so carelessly? 'Jade?'



She sucked in her breath from those cool fingers on her arm, her whole being crying out in unutterable longing. And then like a cruel blessing a little voice was cutting in, 'Daddy.. .there's a funny-looking butterfly with jagged wings over there. Can you come and have a look at it for me, please?'

Reluctantly Jade opened her eyes, hearing Kent's murmur of acknowledgement. 'Are you all right?' he queried, barely above a whisper, and now she could see the agony of wanting etched on his face.

For once, she knew, he was wishing they were alone, the depth of his need lighting a fire of response in her so that she could utter only a tremulous, 'Yes,' overwhelmed by her feelings for him as she watched him get to his feet and go, more out of duty than anything else, she sensed, after Piers.

Kent had arranged to take Piers back to his grandparents on Sunday evening, meeting them in a village several miles away where Kent said his parents had been visiting friends.

Instinctively, as they were leaving, Jade hugged the little boy, though tentatively, thinking he might shrug away with embarrassment as some boys of his age might have done. So she was pleased when he not only returned her hug, but, looking up at her with those Kentlike eyes, asked appealingly, 'Will you still be here when I come again next time?'

Unable to look at Kent, Jade coloured as she searched for an answer, and was rescued by the man's smooth, almost laughing response.

'What are you suggesting I do, Piers? Kidnap her?' His eyes held gentle mockery as they met the flabbergasted indignation of Jade's. 'Won't be long,' he promised softly, ushering the boy out of the door,

but this time he didn't lock it, and she wondered why. Was he so certain of his emotional hold over her—even if it meant ..nothing to him—to have realised that she would stay with him forever if he requested it?

He was back before she had realised it, coming aboard as she was spinning a few small items of underwear she had washed by hand, but as soon as he stepped inside she could see that, for some reason, his earlier light mood had vanished.

'Hi,' she smiled, but was met with little more than a grunt as he picked up a sketchpad and a few coloured pens that his son had left lying on the sofa.

'Did Piers go off all right?' she asked, when he seemed disinclined to make any further conversation, and found it hard not to flinch when he answered with an almost curt,

'Yes, why shouldn't he?'

She shrugged. 'No reason.' Across the saloon she met his dark, enigmatic gaze. 'You look tired,' she observed as the spin-drier whined to a halt. Hot and tired, she thought, seeing him standing there massaging the muscles at the nape of his neck.

'Yes.' It was said with absent agreement.

'Can I get you something? A cold drink?'

He shook his head. 'No,' he said, but this time he gave her a weary smile, his gaze running over the scal- loped-necked white top he had bought for her and the feminine sway of her skirt. 'I rang your father while I was out. The Europe deal was finalised yesterday morning, which probably means you can get back to a normal existence from now on. So you'll probably be more than overjoyed to know that I'll be driving you home tomorrow.'

Well, it had to come some time, didn't it? she thought. So why couldn't she accept it? Why couldn't she control this unbearable, crushing melancholy when to be free of him was what she had wanted all along?

'It might also interest you to know that your boyfriend's been vetted and found to be... satisfactory...' he seemed to need a deep breath as he crossed the saloon into the galley "... as far as any suspect connections are concerned.'

'Thanks,' she said stiltedly, trying to keep her voice from quavering, picking, up on that derogatory note in his. And yet, taking the clothes out of the drier, she felt a small pang of conscience in realising that she had given barely a moment's thought to Juan over the last couple of days. 'No doubt you'd have taken more pleasure in telling me he was the head of the Mafia,' she snapped, but with a sudden reckless hope that his dark mood might be attributable to the fact that he didn't want her to leave...

'I also have to ring Karen...' Of course. His comment, like a thought expressed aloud, stabbed through her naive optimism, cruelly reminding her of the other woman in his life. 'I'm afraid I've rather neglected her of late,' he went on, oblivious to her feelings, 'and ignoring one's agent hardly makes for a smooth-working relationship long-term.'

Or any other! Jade thought achingly, depression stealing over her like a cold grey cloak with the acceptance that her own relationship with Kent—such as it was—was drawing to its inevitable close.

'I've quite a few things to tidy up in the study before I leave here tomorrow, so I'll just grab a working supper, if you don't mind. Have what you like. Put the television <sub>x</sub> on if you want to—it won't disturb me. But if you'll excuse me, I'd like to make an early start.'

So he didn't even intend spending this last night with her, Jade was miserably made to realise, and, taking the items she had washed outside on the deck to dry, she made herself a sandwich after Kent had gone into the study, and tried to settle down to watch a film.

The images on the screen just danced in front of her eyes, making no sense to her at all, and finally, unable to concentrate, she decided on an early night.

It was much later that it dawned on her that Kent must still be working, because she could hear the odd creak of his chair occasionally, the sound of a drawer sliding open, through the cabin wall. Wasn't he ever going to bed? she wondered. Or was he feeling as little like sleeping as she was? Because she had been lying there for what seemed like hours, the hopelessness of her feelings for him, with this burning physical need, keeping slumber as far away as the moon.

Every nerve straining, aching to feed itself on the smallest sound, with the mind-craving tangibility of his nearness, she heard his chair creak again, then some soft clicks followed by the muffled tones of his deep voice filtering through the wall.

It took her a few moments to realise that he was using the dictaphone she had noticed that first morning on his desk. But did he always pace up and down when his mind was in full creative flow? she wondered. Pacing, pacing, like a caged animal, while the soft resonance of his voice ebbed through the darkness, washing over her like some powerful aphrodisiac to create a sweet tide of wanting through her body.

'Oh, hell!' Fighting the feverish ache in her loins, she tugged the duvet high up around her ears, trying to shut out the cruel stimulation of his voice.

Nothing, however, could shut out the sudden crash that reached her ears, then a curse, followed by a curious silence that had her scrambling, unthinkingly, out of bed. Donning a shirt he had lent her in place of his robe, she hurried along the passageway and knocked on the study door. There was no reply from within, and gingerly Jade pushed back the sliding door, giving a small gasp when the shaft of light spilling in from the passageway showed Kent half lounging there in the darkness, still fully clothed, on the bunk that had been made up for Piers, the glass lamp that had stood on the desk now in fragments on the cabin floor.

'Are you all right?' she asked tremulously, transfixed by the lean power of him as he reached across the bed to retrieve what was left of the lamp, her throat inexplicably dry.

'Yes, of course I am. It was just.. .this... confounded... lamp.' His words were punctuated by his actions as he set it back on the desk, his shirt pulling tautly from the stretch of his body. 'I'm sorry. Did I wake you?' he said.

'No, I was already awake,' she told him without thinking, then wished she had been more prudent in her reply when she saw a smile soften the rugged structure of his face.

'And you came rushing to my aid?' Those long, lowered lashes concealed mockery, she guessed, as he sat back now, studying her, a dark silhouette against the light.

'I—I thought you were hurt,' she admitted shyly.

His smile was enervatingly sensual. 'Do I look it?' he breathed, spreading both arms casually along the narrow shelf lining the wall behind the bed.

As if she weren't having enough difficulty distracting her mind from that relaxed sexuality and the fact that his shirt was gaping practically

to his waist, his subtle invitation brought her gaze skimming across the rich velvet of his chest with its darker feathering of body hair, the muscled steel of his torso transmitting a message of such fitness and virility that she felt an acute ache in the pit of her stomach.

'No.'

'No?' It was a caressing echo of her huskily voiced response. 'Well, that's where you're wrong. I'm hurting very much, Jade. So much that I...' His breath seemed to shudder through his lungs, his jaw clenching from a powerful hunger that told her he was very near the boundaries of his restraint, and she felt an answering hunger surge through her breasts, clutch at her stomach, her bare legs weakening below the shirt she was clutching to her like an ineffectual shield.

'For God's sake,' Kent breathed, his voice a ragged whisper, 'come here.'

Jade's heart beat wildly against her ribcage, her brain battling against the screaming responses of her body. All she had to do was turn around. Or cross the floor and seal her commitment to him—physically and emotionally—forever. The choice was hers.

Only it wasn't. And never had been, she realised, from the moment she'd entered his cabin, moving now like an automaton—drawn only by his will, her pulses racing as he stood up, looking down at her where she had stopped, too nervous to take the final step, just a couple of feet away from him.

With one swift movement he had closed the breach, and then nothing else existed, nothing but the warmth of his mouth burning down on hers and those hard hands tugging at her shirt, seeking the warm, pliant softness of her body. 'Oh, Kent, don't leave me! Don't leave me now,' she begged, desire dragging the desperate plea from her lips.

'Did you think I intended to?' he said hoarsely and, catching her up in his arms, was bearing her down into the master cabin and the inviting luxury of the double bed.

He'd misinterpreted what she had meant, she thought, through a heady tingling of anticipation, but perhaps it was better that way, better if he didn't realise the full extent of her emotions.

'You're beautiful,' he breathed, his face a harmony of passion and tenderness, his fingers tracing her silken hair to the creamy column of her throat, her shoulders, the upper swell of her breasts. Then his mouth covering hers brought him down to her—the warmth and weight and feel of him all that she had longed for, the sensation of his body hair against her sensitised breasts bringing her straining towards him with a small, anguished cry of need.

'You're too impatient,' he teased softly, his breathing irregular as his lips feathered kisses along the gentle curvature of her jaw. 'I've wanted you so much—for so long—I've got no intention of rushing this. I want to know you, Jade—every last part of you. Your mind, your body, your secrets. Teach me everything, darling. I want to share everything with you. Every last experience...'

His voice was raw with emotion, his features impassioned above her as he swiftly shed his clothes. Then their bodies were meeting in a blend of softness and steel—velvet and silk, his naked warmth against hers like a kindling spark to a dry forest that galvanised her into a writhing, sobbing wanton beneath him so that she knew it required every ounce of his control not to take her there and then.

'Oh, my darling love...' It was a sound wrung from him, and which she knew was only induced by passion, yet which she needed to hear so much because she had so much to give—and only to this man, her soul promised through the heady torture of those warm hands, shaping, moulding her to him, making her his.

And then she was lost in a topsy-turvy world of sensation, where feeling and touch were the only signposts she could follow and where, for the first time in her life, she truly belonged to someone—to Kent, the man she loved, following his lead as he guided her beyond the boundaries of ecstasy to an unimagined rapture that was almost too much for her to bear. Yet no amount of pleasure could compare with the moment he entered her, and the shattering collision of sensations that pushed her over the brink, bringing her up to meet him in a sobbing ecstasy of release.

She was bursting with a joyous emotion, holding him within the warm haven of her body as his own passion exploded deep within her, carrying her away to another plane where there was only the two of them, her and Kent—her keeper, her lover, her mate.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

JADE awoke to the sunlight streaming in through the open curtains, a pink-gold light that assured her it was still very early, and, remembering, she uttered a soft sound of contentment, turning over to find that, surprisingly, she was alone.

Languorously, guessing Kent was in the shower, she stretched out to caress the pillow where his head had lain, and felt something rustle beneath her hand.

It was a note and, propping herself up on an elbow, she read, 'THANKS FOR HEAVEN. I'LL JOIN YOU THERE LATER. GONE TO PICK MUSHROOMS FOR BREAKFAST-OR EVEN LUNCH!'

So getting her home today was the last thing on his mind, she realised with a singing excitement in her blood, wondering how just the memory of a man's lovemaking could rekindle her desire with such acuteness, making her body moist, her breasts heavy and aching as she sat up now, hugging her knees, anticipating his return.

She loved him! she thought—immeasurably! And after the tenderness and consideration he had shown towards her last night she had no doubt that he was more than halfway to being in love with her.

Joy brought a song to her lips as she showered and put on her shorts and summery top, and she was still singing as she finished laying the table for breakfast in the dinette. Then, finding the key Kent had left on top of the heating stove in the saloon, she stepped out on to the deck and into the glittering morning.

The heatwave seemed eternal. The sun was already dispersing the fine layer of mist on the river, and Jade repositioned the damp lingerie she'd put out to dry on the locker the previous night, her attention held by one of the swans gliding in on to the island, its magnificent white

wings outstretched. Like angel wings, she fancied, her cheeks pinkening as she remembered Kent's reference to heaven.

'Good morning.'

An unfamiliar voice made her turn sharply, both startled and surprised. She hadn't been aware of the man rowing up alongside the barge and, aware of how alone she was at that moment, cagily she returned his greeting.

'I'm sorry if I startled you.' Roughly the same age as Kent, the man smiled, clearly sensing her misgivings, his fair, wavy hair mirrored on his bare forearms and his legs, exposed by the khaki shorts. 'I'm Steve Maddocks, and I live further up river. I saw Kent's car in the club car park as I drove past last night and hadn't realised he was back, so I decided to row down to see him this morning for the exercise. I hadn't realised he—er—had company.'

Jade could have kicked herself for blushing. Of course Steve Maddocks would jump to the natural conclusion. The fact that it had turned out to be the right one—however unintended—didn't help to ease her embarrassment at all.

'I'm sorry.' Now it was her turn to apologise. 'I didn't realise you were a friend of Kent's. I'm sure he'll be back any minute—if you'd like to wait—have a cup of coffee...'

The man made an appreciative, though totally inoffensive, survey of her slender figure. 'I think he'd consider me more of a friend if I took a rain-check on that,' he said with a knowing smile, making Jade's colour deepen. 'There is one thing you could do for me, though.' He sat forward, resting his arms on his oars. 'The last time I spoke to him he said he'd let me have a book I lent him—*The Glorious Avon*. He said he'd finished it. Would you know if he brought it back with him or not?'

She couldn't recall seeing it, but that didn't mean that he hadn't. 'Hold on a moment. I'll go and have a look,' she offered, pleased to help.

It wasn't on the bookshelf in the saloon, and she went along the passage to the study. It could be anywhere, she thought, scanning the amply stocked shelves, acutely mindful of the last time she had been in that cabin, though the broken pieces of the lamp had already been swept up, the bed folded away against the wall.

Just as she was about to give up, deciding that Steve Maddocks would have to come back when Kent was there, her hopes were raised by something peeping out from under a pile of papers lying in a disorganised tray on his desk.

Success! She beamed as she lifted the pile and discovered the book she was looking for—and something else—something that had been lying immediately beneath it.

With the book in one hand, papers suspended in the other, she stared down at the loose page marked 'Research Notes', written in Kent's flowing scrawl, and under it the words 'J.N.—The perfect Bitch?'

J.N. Her initials. Numbly, she took a moment to grasp what she was seeing. He couldn't... Surely he wouldn't...

Her bewildered brain wouldn't even function properly. What did it mean? That he had been using her all along? Using her as some... some research experiment? she wondered tormentedly, as her thinking processes began working normally again. Was that why he'd brought her here—because he was making a character study of her? Using her to research some character for one of his brilliant books, and one whom he obviously—thoroughly—despised!

Tears burned behind her eyes as she saw beyond her naivete to his cold, calculated motives. And to imagine that she could possibly have hoped she could make him love her!

As she stood there, shaken, tortured by the discovery, a sound outside brought her mind back to Steve Maddocks and the book he had asked for, and somehow, finding some self-poise, she went back up on deck.

'Thanks!' he grinned, half standing to take it from her so that the little boat rocked precariously. 'I've got a class of fifteen-year-olds to take through river pollution tomorrow...' he tapped the book '... and I need to check some facts. Tell Kent I dropped by, and while you're about it tell him from me I think he's a sly old devil—sneaking off down here with a beautiful girl when he told me he was tied up with research in London.' He was grinning, repositioning his oars to move off, unaware of her emotional turmoil. 'All I can say is, if this is what he meant by working-' he gave an innocuous little wink '—then I'm definitely in the wrong job!'

It hurt to smile, but somehow Jade managed it, and, nice though he was, she was relieved when the man had gone. It had been too much of a strain trying to be friendly—to pretend nothing had happened, when all she felt like doing was sobbing her heart out.

How could Kent have done this to her? she agonised. The man she loved. Trusted. He had even admitted to his friend that it was research that was keeping him in London, something she might easily have interpreted as his excuse to keep the true nature of his assignment as her bodyguard confidential if she hadn't already found that note!

Sobs tore at her lungs, bringing her back inside. However could she face Kent now, knowing how he'd used her? She couldn't! she thought, dreading his return.

Yet she couldn't do anything else but wait and, feeling almost criminal-like, she slunk back into his study. If he'd written anything else detrimental about her, then she needed to know.

The dictaphone Kent had been using last night was lying on the desk, and gingerly she picked it up, winding the tape back a little way, to discover that it contained only suggestions to his scriptwriter over the serialisation of his latest book. Even a furtive glance at the files in the drawers rendered nothing further. Just that note, she thought bitterly, finding it and absorbing its cruel connotations again.

It was dated too, she saw now—the day of Roberta's wedding. So he must have come back here and written it after -seeing her that day—after realising what a rich experience lay in offering her his protection!

The agitated croaking of a bird, then a footstep on the deck, brought her back to the present. Kent!

Eager "to get out of his study, she stumbled clumsily against the desk, sending pens, paperclips and other small items scattering across it. She groaned, because he was coming down the passage now, calling her name. Pulses pounding, dreading this confrontation with him, she stood rigid as a statue as he looked into the cabin—and with such a heart-stopping smile when he saw her there that her own heart seemed to tear with the brutal knowledge of his deceit.

'There you are, angel eyes. Nature's own-' He broke off, seeing the pallor of her face, her pained expression, placing the bag he was holding casually on top of the typewriter. 'What's wrong, darling?' He frowned, glancing up from the chaos of his desk. 'Are you... looking for something?'

'Yes.' The blue eyes, fixed on his, burned with tortured accusation. 'And I found it—thanks to Steve Maddocks coming along and wanting his book! Quite a game you had going for yourself, didn't you, Kent?' She couldn't keep the sob out of her voice, as she remembered the times when she had wondered what he did, alone in his suite for hours—the times when she'd thought he had been idly

doodling, when all the time he'd been making cold, calculated notes about *her*. 'What better way than to kidnap someone to build a lifelike, living, breathing character? Tell me, did I live up to all your expectations? Or did I fail to measure up in any way in being the *perfect bitch*?'

Amazingly, his eyelids closed for a second as though she'd dealt him a physical blow. 'Oh, grief!' he uttered, exhaling heavily.

'What's wrong, Kent? Don't you like being found out? Well, I didn't like finding out I'd just been used--brought here to provide you with inspiration to feed your twisted intellect—especially after all those lies about doing it for my own good! What's the advice they give to authors? Sleep with your main character? What a laugh! What a bonus it must have been for you when this one actually turned out to be willing to!'

She was very near to tears, backing against the chair as Kent reached out to her, seeing the bag he'd discarded sliding down the typewriter keys spilling dark fleshy mushrooms out on to the sunny-gold leather of the desk.

'That isn't how I regarded making love to you—as a bonus.'

'No?' she sneered disbelievingly, anger giving some colour to her pale, tense features. 'And I suppose you're going to deny that you took this job solely as a means of research? So that you could get all the information you wanted about me for one of your precious books!'

There was the briefest of pauses, only the scent of wild fungus impinging absently on Jade's senses with the splash of some bird on the water outside.

'No,' said Kent quietly, 'I can't deny that.'

Crazily, she had hoped that he would. Hoped that there could have been some other, plausible explanation for those heart-crushing words she had found. But there wasn't, and he wasn't even trying to pretend otherwise. Anyway, what could he have said?

'Your father wanted me to be your bodyguard because he knew me-'

'Trusted you, you mean!' she flung bitterly in his face.

'All right, I had that coming to me,' he accepted with a hard lift of his chest, 'but I told you at the beginning, I wasn't really interested in the job until he persuaded me to pop down to Gloucestershire that day. I guess he hoped that if I got to talk to you I could be persuaded to change my mind—and I was. You came over as so darn-' His jaw clenched hard, stifling whatever he had been going to say. 'Anyway, I couldn't resist the opportunity you presented me with, so I took the job— and, I admit, for purely selfish reasons—but my interest wasn't just professional. You got to me in every way it was possible to get to a man-'

*'Bravo!'* She tossed her head with a swish of dark silk. 'So you found the perfect opportunity for some good research, plus the long-term possibility of a good lay!'

If she hadn't already realised his true character she could have imagined that he flinched, that those grey irises grew murky with some inner conflict as he breathed, 'Don't reduce last night to something crude.'

'Why not?' she uttered with a wide-flung hand. 'Isn't that what it was?'

'You know damn well it wasn't!' There was anger in him, even while he was still trying to placate her—make excuses for his actions, she thought gallingly—knowing he was in the wrong. 'And I wasn't under the impression you had any reason for complaints last night.'

Now it was her turn to flinch, because, of course, she hadn't. Last night had seemed so perfect—so exquisitely right. Hurting, not knowing how to answer, she made to sweep past him out of the cabin.

'Oh, no, you don't!' Determinedly he caught her arm. 'We aren't leaving it like this. I at least have a right to a hearing, even if my motives didn't start out to be entirely honourable—but my initial reasons for taking the job had absolutely nothing to do with why I brought you here!'

'No?' she challenged tremulously, because he was much too close, the fresh scent of the morning still clinging to his clothes, his nearness too powerful a reminder of his practised lovemaking the previous night. 'No,' he breathed. 'Your safety was paramount, of course. But I wanted you with me.' He drew in a breath. 'Oh, what the hell! I wanted to stop you running off with that ingratiating Rodriguez...'

'Thanks!'

She tried to pull away from him, but he caught her arms now, his face lined with impatience—and guilt too! she strongly suspected.

'For heaven's sake, listen! I know I don't deserve it-'

'You're darn right, you don't!' It was a cry from the heart, because every nerve was aching with a torturous longing, every feminine cell craving for him to crush her in his arms—crush cruel reality from her mind—but, of course, no oblivion of the senses could reverse the truth of his cold-blooded actions.

'What am I supposed to do, Jade, say?' he enquired tonelessly, relaxing his hold slightly as a small choked protest broke from her lips. 'It's unfortunate you found that note—but I've already said it had nothing to do with why I brought you here. For heaven's sake, what would you have me say—that I'm in love with you?'



He made it sound so incredulous that a fresh surge of pain swept through her.

'Quite honestly I wouldn't believe anything you said, Kent Solomon!' She tugged out of his grasp, feeling as if she had wrenched away from part of herself as she forced back a sob to conclude, 'And I don't really care one way or the other—but I only hope for your sake you can swim as well as you lie.'

She heard his impatient shout behind her as she tore blindly down the passageway, frantically aware that he was giving chase and, reaching the saloon doors, she desperately plucked the key from the lock. She had secured them behind her before she had even realised what she was doing, the key clasped tightly in her hand.

'Jade!' Closed doors couldn't contain the displeasure in Kent's voice as he jolted the handle, rapped angrily on the glass pane. 'Jade! Open this door! Come on, sweetheart—I understand how you feel, but now you're just being silly. You don't want to do this.'

'Don't I?' She was hurting too much to care about how annoyed he looked, or the way the glass was rattling—threatening to break—from the angry force of his hand. 'Just watch me, Kent.' Pain was tearing her in- sides apart, but she didn't allow it to show, her smile displaying a satisfaction she couldn't even feel as she held the key at arm's length over the side of the barge, and the next moment let it go.

The first person she saw as soon as she arrived home was Jeremy, coming through the hall.

'Well, look who's back!' he grinned broadly. "Fraid Pater beat you to it by about two hours. And what's so special about this Kent—keeping it such a deadly secret when all along I knew you had

designs on the guy?' Blue eyes took in her ruffled hair, her cotton top and shorts. 'Have a good time?' he enquired meaningfully, grinning again.

Her brother's insensitive teasing was more than Jade could take at that moment. 'Great,' was all she murmured curtly in an attempt to dispel any notions he might have about her and Kent. She couldn't bear anyone guessing the truth. Jeremy didn't appear surprised, though, at seeing her, she thought, heading for the stairs, and a few moments later she realised why.

'So at least you had the sense to come straight home.' The rebuke came from the doorway of her father's study, but there was relief in Rufus Napier's voice, on his face. 'I didn't spend time and money on the best security man I could get just for you to treat his protection like some frock you can discard just when and wherever it takes your fancy.'

'I'm sorry, Dad.' Jade crossed over to her father and kissed his flaccid cheek. 'I didn't mean to cause you any worry.' Clearly, Kent had rung ahead and warned him to expect her—probably the minute she'd taken off, leaving him stranded on the barge.

Uncomfortably she waited for a further scolding from her father over the manner in which she had left her keeper, but it didn't come, and she could only breathe a sigh of relief when he said, 'Good grief, girl! I know you've encouraged talk about yourself on more occasions than I care to remember, but I've always credited my daughter with enough sense to give her the benefit of the doubt. But running off on your own—and like that!' He cast a disapproving glance over her clothes. 'I'm beginning to wonder... Did you think Kent was doing it for love, spending his valuable time on you?' he enquired, unwittingly spearing her to the heart. 'I gather he told you who he is? And that in using his discretion in taking you out of London he was only acting

on my previous instructions? So why show such disrespect? Didn't he treat you well?'

'Oh, very.' Tears were too close now, her voice very near to shaking; she was only vaguely able to gather that Kent couldn't have told him about the little trip she'd been planning with Juan. If only he hadn't interfered! If only she could have gone off on that harmless holiday with the other man—been in Venezuela now—she wouldn't be suffering this heartache, this cruel, agonising disillusionment. 'Don't worry, Dad—he complied with *every* instruction,' she uttered bitterly, glimpsing her father's puzzled expression as she made her escape before her tears betrayed her, and tore blindly up the stairs.

She was seated at dinner with Jeremy and her father, trying to conceal the fact that she had no appetite whatsoever, when Kent eventually returned.

'Come in, Kent. Join us.' Delighted to see him, Rufus Napier was getting to his feet, but with polished courtesy Kent waved the invitation aside, looking, Jade thought with a gulp as his eyes found hers, like a man seeking recompense—and determined to have it!

'No, thank you, Rufus.' He looked casual, big and daunting, those cool grey eyes never faltering from hers. 'If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to Jade.'

Jade's stomach muscles tightened up and beneath the cool cerise silk of her blouse and trousers she felt uncomfortably hot. She had been expecting this all day. She had even contemplated not being here when he returned, only the desire not to upset her father on his first day back persuading her to remain.

Now she sensed her father assessing those vibrations between her and Kent, along with Emma—ostensibly stacking dishes at the

sideboard—only the need for privacy inducing her into complying with Kent so that she went ahead of him, out on to the patio.

'Well, at least I didn't have to drag you out,' he breathed.

She didn't answer, staring tensely at the clouds gathering in the twilight sky, signalling the end of the good weather.

'You might like to know I've returned your gown, your jewellery and your car.'

Jade swallowed. 'Thanks.' It had been an extravagant and expensive taxi ride from the golf club. But that wasn't what he had brought her out here to talk about, she thought with a nervous shudder as she caught his swift, preliminary breath behind her.

'I won't say what I'd like to say, because it won't do anything to promote good relations between us—or alleviate the feeling of what I'd sorely love to do to you for behaving in the foolhardy way you behaved this morning...'

'Like putting you to so much inconvenience?' It was a cold sneer, although she didn't dare to take her eyes off the little gathering of clouds and face him—couldn't trust herself enough emotionally to turn around.

'For being stupid enough to run off on your own like that!' he rasped, close to losing his temper, and Jade guessed why when he added, 'If I were your father now, I wouldn't be happy ever letting you out of my sight after this!'

'Oh, I see.' Bitter clarity etched her face as she pivoted to face him, her shattered illusions about him forcing the barbed words from her lips. 'You were worried about what Dad would say about you failing in your duty to protect me. Why? Concerned he'd deduct it from your fee?' -

Something twisted inside her from the mere thought that that might be all he was interested in, and she shuddered, seeing his mouth assume the appearance of carved stone.

'No more concerned than I was about how he'd react if he'd known exactly how you got away from me.'

But, of course, he hadn't told her father—just as he hadn't told him about the trip she'd been planning with Juan. Already she had realised that, and she lowered her gaze, afraid of weakening beneath the cool directness of his.

'You got out all right, didn't you?' A tremor undermined the intended carelessness in her voice, but fortunately Kent didn't seem to notice.

'Yes.' His breath seemed to shiver through his lungs. 'After I'd broken the lock, the glass and the door-frame and telephoned Steve to come and take me downstream to try and find the dinghy you'd abandoned by that bridge.'

But only because she'd had to get as far away from him as possible—afraid of how easily she might have succumbed if he'd caught her, tried to persuade her to stay. But she refused to meet those admonishing grey eyes, feeling the silence stretching between them like an elastic band about to snap.

'Jade...' Kent's voice was soft, like his sudden footfall on the flagstones.

'Don't touch me!' It was a small tremulous sound, shunning his clear intention—but only because she wanted it so much! And because she knew that, hopelessly, if she allowed him to touch her, she'd be lost, she said, palms upwards, backing away, 'Just don't come near me.'

'Why not?' he tossed at her brusquely. 'Because I haven't lived up to your preconceived ideas about me?'

All right, so I'm human. I saw you as an opportunity to further my own ends—just as everyone else does at some time or other in this cold Machiavellian world— but that wasn't the reason I took you to the boat.'

'No. You wanted to break things up between Juan and me! Well, for your information, Kent Solomon, you haven't succeeded! I've written to Juan and explained everything, and as soon as I hear from him that he still wants me to join him I'll be flying to Venezuela as previously intended!'

Laughter came from the house—a joke shared between father and son, and a night-hunting bird, taking off over the pergola with a swift fanning of wings, shrieked into the gathering dusk.

'You've got to be kidding?' Kent's incredulous remark came through clenched teeth, and even in the dim light Jade could see him looking at her as though she had taken leave of her senses.

'I've never been more serious about anything in my life, Kent,' she forced herself to say steadily, stabbed by the tricks of the twilight that seemed to mark those strong features with something akin to desolation. The fact was that she *had* written to Juan, but only to apologise for terminating their relationship, though, of course, for her self-preservation she couldn't tell Kent that, any more than she could tell him how much she loved him, and that already she knew she'd never be able to love anyone else with the same intensity again.

'I see.' He seemed to snarl the words. 'And what about last night? Didn't that mean anything to you at all?'

Oh, why was he doing this to her—making it all seem like her fault? she wondered agonisingly. To save his ego? His unadulterated masculine pride?

'No more than it did to you,' she uttered, with an unsteady lifting of her chin.

'How the hell do you know what it meant to me?' he rasped angrily. 'Oh, sure, I take women down there every weekend-'

'Like Karen?' Jade broke in over his facetious remark.

That male jaw seemed to tighten as he took a deep breath. 'Keep Karen out of this,' he said grimly.

'Why? because you wouldn't want her to know what went on between you and me?'

'I wouldn't give a damn!'

'No? I'll bet you wouldn't!'

Anger flared in his eyes, then was quickly banked by the quality of control that put a more reasoning note into his voice. 'Jade, for heaven's sake! Aren't we getting just a bit side-tracked from the real crux of the matter? That note. That's what this is all about. Something written by a stranger about a stranger—before I even knew you. So why let something so meaningless spoil everything we've shared together, could go on sharing? I regret it—sincerely—but I don't see that there's anything else I can do.'

And he was only using those sweet, honey-tongued words on her now, she thought abjectly, because he had had her surrender and knew that, whatever she thought about him, it wouldn't take much to get her back into bed with him again.

'You're right, there isn't!' she flung back bitterly, jerking her head aside, refusing to look at him as she felt the angry grip of his hands on her upper arms.

'For heaven's sake, Jade, do you want us to split up like this? Are you really going to go on like this, acting like—like a-?' 'A what?' Angrily she met his gaze. 'A perfect bitch?'

Whether or not she intended to exasperate him enough that he would leave she didn't know, feeling only a crushing finality as that deep chest lifted as though he was steeling himself to say something before he pushed her disgustedly from him and strode away.



## CHAPTER NINE

JADE stared dispassionately out at the soggy Cotswold garden to where Roberta's little fruit trees seemed to be glistening with a thousand tears. It had rained almost incessantly for two months, she reflected ruefully—ever since that night Kent had walked out of her life—and yet she had scarcely noticed the dreary, sunless summer. Perhaps it was because the pain had been so unendurable after he had left that the only way she had been able to cope with it was to plough all her thoughts and her energies into the long-term prospect of managing the family empire so that she wasn't left with any time to think.

'I never believed any daughter of mine would have such an aptitude for business.' Recalling her father's words to her only the previous week brought a rather sad smile to her lips. 'I've always said commerce was a man's domain, but you've certainly got more of a flair for it than your brother's shown.'

And that was how the subject had changed disconcertingly to Kent, she remembered, with that familiar racking anguish whenever she thought about him. Still, it *was* because of that contact with which he'd supplied Jeremy that her brother seemed happy at last embarking on a career in journalism, and indirectly it had been that that had forced Rufus Napier to realise that, if his heir's interests didn't yet stretch to following him into the business, a daughter was not only the next best thing, but proving to be as capable as any son.

But why had her father had to extol the man's virtues quite so profusely? she thought with a deep sigh, innocently torturing her as he'd concluded, 'Now why couldn't you have come home and told me you were going to marry someone like that?'

'Because I don't love him?' Even now she could remember the agony it had caused her to formulate the lie. 'Anyway, what was so special

about him,' she had added to reinforce her outward show of indifference, 'that you imagine he could possibly have been so right for me, Dad?'

'Because he's tough and shrewd and entirely dedicated to duty—and because I want what's best for my daughter,' he had admitted almost reluctantly. 'And because he's the type of man you need to keep you in line.'

And he'd had to stick that on the end, she'd decided, to temper that awkward admission to caring—as he'd always cared, she realised now, though, ironically, it had taken Kent to make her see it.

Torn by a gulf of loneliness, she had gone across and hugged her father then, and still couldn't help feeling that age-old sense of rejection when he had put her from him, unable, as he'd always been, to handle demonstrative affection.

'He was only like that because he was being paid to be,' she had said bleakly, unable to bring herself to reveal Kent's humiliating motive for taking the job at all, and she remembered how she had flinched from the way her father had sworn in front of her for the first time in her life.

'If that's all the respect you have for the man,' he had gone onto scold, 'then I think, my girl, you need putting straight. Call it dedication to the job or just something he felt he might have owed your Uncle Silas, but Kent Solomon didn't take a penny—not a cent—for all the days and nights he spent looking after you!'

She started, brought back to the present by Roberta calling excitedly to her from the hall.

'Jade, you'll never guess! Those curtains I ordered for the bedroom have just been delivered. Now you can help me get the rail up before Jonathan gets back from his mother's. I do love him, but he's no

handyman,' she giggled. 'Heaven help our kids if they ever need a dad who's useful with his hands!'

Jade laughed at Roberta's teasing remarks about her new, academic-minded husband, and silently rebuked herself for the sudden, stabbing recollection of Kent, hard-headed and capable, doing a repair job to that bunk on the barge.

'Then let's start now!' she offered, almost too enthusiastically. After all, wasn't that why she had accepted her friend's invitation for the weekend—to lend her support in furnishing the spacious luxury cottage, as well as to try and numb the pain that had resurrected itself ever since she had learned of Kent's staunch refusal to be paid?

Why hadn't he taken his fee when it had necessitated such an offer to engage him—even if it was, according to Jeremy, suggested by their father rather than specifically demanded by Kent? Had he been telling her the truth when he had said he hadn't dragged her off to that boat solely for his own selfish ends? Had she been unreasonable in not listening to him when he had expressed regret over that note? He'd said himself that it had been written before he'd even got to know her. Was it possible perhaps that he had cared? Or was she reading more into his noble refusal of payment than there really was—because she so desperately wanted to—because, after all, he didn't really *need* the money? And perhaps he'd felt that ultimately it would be worth having done the job for nothing just so that he could walk away with all the low-down on her!

Tussling with yards of flowery cotton, she recoiled from that last possibility and the thoughts that kept spinning round her brain. What did it matter what reason he'd had for doing anything? It was over! she chided herself with harrowing acceptance. He was in the States now—probably having a whale of a time with his wonderful Karen. So why should she care? she thought bitterly, turning away from her friend's softly puzzling eyes, because Roberta didn't know how Kent

had abducted her and how—foolishly—she had fallen in love with him. And if she started to guess—question her about Kent, she was afraid she might give in to tears, and she knew that if she did she would never be able to stop.

She left Roberta and Jonathan after lunch the following day, driving back through the narrow Cotswold village. She turned at the junction with the main road, about to accelerate away, but the imposing grey building of the church filled her with such longing that, while already berating herself for her sheer masochism, she was parking in the lay-by on the other side of the road.

The village attracted visitors throughout the year, but, because of the unsettled weather, today it was particularly quiet, only the occasional hum of a car breaking the silence of the afternoon and the clear, powerful song of a thrush ringing out from the top of one of the damp conifers as she made her way through the deserted churchyard.

Why was she doing this to herself? Fervently she tried telling herself that she was a fool. What was she expecting to gain from deliberately torturing herself? she reasoned with a dart of pain beneath her ribs as she came to the spot where she had first seen Kent, standing distant and aloof, back in the spring. Why couldn't she just have ignored him then instead of seeing him as an exciting challenge? Why couldn't she have recognised the danger of falling in love with a man like that?

She was crying now, a steady stream of silent emotion which, over the past few weeks, had released itself often unexpectedly and beyond her control, and almost angrily she scuffed at some sodden confetti that was lying on the path, so lost in her memories that she practically resented the sudden, intrusive squeal of car tyres as someone pulled up sharply on the main road, the high whine of an engine bringing her attention to the black Porsche that was reversing swiftly into the lay-by behind hers.

It was starting to drizzle and, pulling up the collar of her raincoat, Jade turned away, not wishing to see anyone. Something beyond instinct, however, sent a prickly feeling along her spine, telling her that this was no sightseer, undeterred by the rain.

Brushing frantically at her tears, immobilised, she stared at the masoned stonework of the church, waiting, breath-held, her eyes closing against a raging longing and joy as, behind her, that chocolate-rich voice drawled, 'Laying ghosts, Jade?'

Grateful for the rain moistening her already damp cheeks, she turned round, her heart leaping uncontrollably at the sight of him. Nothing could detract from the powerful fitness of him beneath the casual jacket and trousers. He was tanned, too, from that all too recent trip to the States.

'Fancy seeing you here!' She forced a breathless little laugh, though she was aching from his every familiar gesture, the tilt of his rain-sprinkled head, that confident stance, that oddly sensuous quirk of his lips.

'I could say the same about you.'

Of course! she thought, swallowing, cursing whatever cruel fate had decreed that he should drive past at that moment, be on that road at all, since it was obvious he had stopped because he had recognised her car, while she...

Desperate to divert him from the truth, she looked past that stalwart shoulder to say with feigned lightness, 'I admire your taste in cars.'

'Yes.' He turned back to her, made a wry gesture with his mouth. 'But then I was once told it suited me so well.'

The sardonic reminder burned a flame of colour into her pale cheeks. 'I really made a fool of myself with you, didn't I?' she said, and with a cutting poignancy, 'All the way down the line.'

Kent shrugged as if it was of no consequence to him, that casual indifference to her stabbing her to the heart.

'So... what a coincidence!' she said over-brightly, not fooling him any more than she was fooling herself, she realised when he failed to respond with the same affected warmth.

'Is that what you want to believe?' His tone was cold, his eyes like chilling steel. 'That the fates have forced our paths to cross like two lovers in some idealistic fairytale?'

He couldn't have made it sound more distasteful if he had tried, the hopes she had half entertained before that he might have had some feeling for her as bruised as the wet confetti beneath her feet.

'I came down here because I wanted—needed—to see you,' he stated with glacial matter-of-factness. 'I would have waited until you got home, but your brother didn't seem too sure about when you were likely to be back.'

'Why?' Her heart was thumping wildly against her ribs. 'Why could you possibly want to see me?' she breathed, but with a small rebellious lift of her chin. Whatever happened she had to keep him from guessing how much she had longed to see him again—and just how his insensitivity was torturing her.

'To give you this.'

He was taking something out of his jacket pocket. A box. The type that expensive jewellery might come in; the type she had received before from men who thought they knew what it would take to get her

into bed—or those who just wanted to prove they weren't after her money.

'Open it.'

She was almost afraid to, but her trembling fingers obeyed his cool command.

There was nothing inside but a sheet of folded paper. Jade frowned, taking it out. It was a bill, and so far from anything she had been imagining that it was with shocked disbelief that she started silently reading its demand.

Cost of replacing and fitting double oak doors and glass panels, complete with new lock and keys;  
One Dior T-shirt;  
Two curtain tie-backs;  
Varnish to ceiling in respect of pancake damage...

'Pancake-' Broken-voiced, trembling, she looked tormentedly up at him, meeting only a cold impassivity in his face. She wanted to laugh. To fling carelessly at him that she'd pay it—double if she had to!—for the inconvenience that being with her had obviously caused. But the words wouldn't come—choked back by emotion, by the bittersweet memories his unfeeling demand had evoked.

Unable to bear it any longer, she pivoted away from him, desolation tearing at her, venting itself on one shuddering, uncontrollable sob.

Her slender body shook beneath the burden of her emotion. She felt her legs buckle and might have collapsed if Kent hadn't caught her from behind, pulling her back against the hard, torturous warmth of his body.

'Oh, my love! My dearest love! Don't, Jade, don't.' His voice trembled with intensity, his lips urgent against her cheek, her jaw, her hair.

'God, how I've longed for this! Let's call an end to this ridiculous pretence. It's just for fools! Can't you see I'm in love with you?'

She couldn't believe what those anguished words were saying, her tear-stained face amazed as he turned her gently in his arms.

'But you can't love me...'

'Why not?' He took the box from the hand that was resting against his chest, smiling as he repocketed it— and so tenderly that she almost dared to hope he might be telling the truth.

'Because you don't even like me,' she sniffed, rummaging for the handkerchief in her pocket and blowing her nose\* still in the circle of his arms.

'Who said I don't?'

'You did. You...'

'Yes?' he pressed, his lips curving indulgently again.

She couldn't quite grasp what it was she was trying to say, feeling as though she were drowning in the emotion emanating from him—from herself.

'I love you,' he whispered, his lips a gentle caress over hers. 'I never meant to hurt you—or humiliate you. Getting you on to that boat was the only thing I could think of to get you away from Rodriguez. It was driving me crazy, imagining you in his arms—in any man's arms after the way you'd responded to me. I suppose pride refused to let me believe that it was all just down to basic physical attraction with you when all I had to do was kiss you...' A deep breath shuddered through his lungs. 'That's why I took you away from him that night—because I was eaten up with jealousy when I guessed about your plans for Venezuela. Protecting you was my primary objective—but I was



equipped enough to do that without taking such drastic measures as you drove me to.'

'But why didn't you tell me, that day I found that note?' she queried, her hands resting against his shoulders, the agony she'd suffered because of it putting fine lines across her forehead.

'Because at the time I wasn't ready to admit it—even to myself. I couldn't understand what was happening to me with you—not only then but before that.' His voice seemed to shake with remembering. 'That first morning on the barge, I came in to see if you wanted some lunch, and you were asleep—but you looked so beautiful, so vulnerable, I couldn't tear myself away from you, stop myself from kissing you...'

Her dream, she realised, amazed. Only it hadn't been a dream. It was real.

'I didn't want to get involved, and yet...' His jaw clenched from the depth of his unwelcome and devastating enslavement to her femininity, making her wonder whether he loved her, even now, against his will. 'I thought that when the job was over, when I could get away, I'd be able to get you out of my system—or at least see things in perspective in another country, with other things on my mind.'

'Like Karen?' she remembered, still able to feel the same jealousy he'd mentioned over his relationship with the other woman. 'You took her on your boat too.' And when a tawny brow arched, expressing surprise at her wounded accusation, she added, 'Eight-year-olds aren't always as discreet as you might like them to be.'

He smiled indulgently at his son's innocent revelation. 'Karen's my agent,' he stressed quietly then, 'and a friend. I wouldn't be able to work so compatibly with her if she weren't. And yes, I've taken her

down to Hampshire with me—but only because she was having boyfriend trouble coupled with a spate of stress from overworking and I thought she'd benefit from the break. But she's certainly never been a sleeping partner—then or at any other time. Our relationship's strictly platonic. It's always been a rule of mine never to get sexually intimate with anyone I'm involved with on a business level.'

Jade couldn't believe the joy she felt in hearing him say that, but, recalling his last temporary line of business, she laughed tremulously, 'No?'

'That's different.' His voice breathed sensuality against the softness of her cheek. 'Talking of which, why did you cut me to pieces by leading me to believe you were going to fly out to meet Juan?'

Of course. That was what she had told him—desperate as she had been to make him think she didn't care. But how... ?

'How did you know I didn't?' she puzzled, tingling when his hands cupped her face and his thumbs gently brushed away the fine rain from her cheeks.

'It was all I could think about all the time I was in America, during the whole flight back on Friday. It was the first thing I had to do when I got home—to call up someone—anyone in your family and find out. I pumped Jeremy—in the most tactful manner I could think of.' He smiled reflectively, clearly satisfied with the result. 'When I found out you weren't only not seeing Juan any more but hadn't even gone to Venezuela I knew then that I had to see you—and immediately. The truth was that I couldn't wait for you to leave Roberta's. I hadn't quite worked out how I was going to get you alone when I eventually got there, or even that you'd give me that chance—consequently I couldn't believe my luck when I saw your car parked over there. I wasn't sure how you'd receive me. Or even if you'd want me back in your life after that incriminating little note I was stupid enough to

write-' he grimaced '—and in ignorance of the real Jade Napier, so I decided the bill approach would be the sure way of telling me how you felt.'

And it had, she thought, realising just how shrewd an observer of human nature he was, and on a note of trembling emotion she uttered softly, 'Bastard.'

'You like it,' he chuckled in a way that was huskily sensual, and covered her mouth with his, the demands of his crushing embrace bringing her desire for him throbbing through her, blazing into life. 'Why didn't you go with Juan?' His tone held a compelling need to know. 'Why did you cry just now?' And more gently, 'Why did you come here in the rain?'

'Because I love you,' Jade sighed against his mouth. 'I think I've always loved you. Right from that first day I saw you standing here and you were so cold and impervious to me. When you went away—that night you came back with my car—I thought I was going to die! I-'

'Hush.' The soft pressure of his lips on hers silenced her anguished declaration. 'I'll never leave you again— not if you don't want me to,' incredibly, it seemed, he was promising. 'I want to look after you. Protect you. Keep you if you want me to...'

'And order me about?' she smiled with a trembling reproof.

'Yes,' he laughed, while the rain, falling more heavily now, streamed down their faces. Gently he caught hers in his cupped hands again, his mouth meeting hers more hungrily than before. 'No,' he amended then, 'I just want to share everything I have with you. My life. My child. My home.'

'Are you asking me to.. .marry you?' she ventured breathlessly, not sure whether he was actually committing himself that far.

'What else?' he breathed, his lips hungry against her hair, her cheek, her throat, causing weakening sensations through her body.

With an immense effort of will, however, Jade pulled back from him just a little, doubt still nagging at the back of her mind. 'And what about your book? The one I provided all that true characterisation for?' she attacked, more than half ready to accede to herself, at least, how bitchy and self-indulgent she must have appeared to him at the beginning. But if he loved her...

'I'm afraid my main character turned traitor on me,' he said gently, unable to look more contrite if he had tried. 'And anyway...' he pulled an askance smile '.. .who wants to read about an ordinary, everyday housewife with eight kids?'

'Eight?' she laughed up into his wonderful face.

'What's wrong?' he smiled. 'Not enough?'

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' She ploughed a small fist into that invincible chest, her expression suddenly sobering beneath the dark intensity of his. 'Are you sure that's what you want?' she asked tentatively. 'I mean, you tried it once—and you said yourself you didn't want to get involved...'

Roughly he caught her to him, tension gripping every hard muscle of his face. 'I *am* involved,' he rasped. 'So much so that it's taking all my will-power not to lay you down on one of these tombstones and-'

'Oh.'

They both started as the bell in the church tower behind them donged loudly.

'It didn't like your irreverence!' she laughed.

'And on a Sunday, too,' Kent said wryly. 'Seriously, though,' he went on, 'those few days I spent on the boat with you were the most pleasurable—and physically painful-' he pulled a face, obviously remembering the depth of his anguished need of her '—of my life. And just to prove it-' briefly he drew back to take something else out of his pocket—something wrapped in tissue paper which he placed in the box he had given her earlier—snapping it shut '—that's what it really should have contained,' he said as he handed it to her.

'What is it?' though her smile was keen, she hesitated in opening his gift and wasn't sure why, or why she flinched as he replied,

'What does one give the girl with everything?'

The Crown Jewels? A custom-built Ferrari? India? That was what Russ had suggested facetiously once.

With mixed emotions she opened the box for the second time, hardly noticing how deftly he relieved her of it so that she could unwrap the layers of protective gossamer tissue—expecting to hear the clink of metal, the glint of a stone. What in fact it revealed touched her with infinitely more poignancy than any expensive gems could ever have done.

It was a swan—a delicate porcelain sculpture, sitting on a finely moulded clump of weed from which several downy grey heads peered curiously out at the world.

'Oh, Kent

She didn't know how she got there, but the next moment she was laughing and crying in his arms, her head only just touching his jaw in her flat shoes so that she felt small and delightfully protected—as he had always made her feel.

'You're getting drenched,' he said, concerned. And when she lifted her head, shaking her damp hair in laughing defiance at the rain, he stated firmly, 'You're coming back to the car,' virtually hustling her along the path and across the road, into the snug, dry confines of his own vehicle.

'Well?' he demanded, pulling his door closed. 'Are you going to marry me, or am I going to have to kidnap you again?'

'You'd do that?' She laughed tremulously, her heart beating with joy and feverish anticipation.

Kent shook his head. 'No,' he said seriously. 'You're going to have to come willingly this time. Apart from which...' his mouth curved in that lazy, sensuous smile '... it's the only way I'm going to let you off paying that bill.'

Jade gave a little mock-gasp. 'You really are merciless, aren't you?' she breathed, pretending to sound horrified, her further gasp totally authentic as he reached for her across the central console, smothering the giggle on her lips.

'Of course I'll marry you,' she promised, loving him, intoxicated by the feel of his damp hair beneath her fingers, by his clean, masculine scent. 'But what about Piers? You said you might lose custody if you were seen to be-'

'Forget it. I said a lot of things,' he murmured softly, kissing away the anxiety between her eyes. 'I think Valerie's relinquishing the idea of taking Piers to Australia as much too hampering to her new lifestyle. Being married to a man who's just landed a TV spot involving a lot of travel will make enough demands on her without dragging a family along as well.'

'What about my job? Will you mind if a career's important to me?' It was something that had to be asked, Jade cogitated, watching the rain

stream down the steamy windows, remembering what he had said that day in that pub about a woman being free to do anything she chose. 'Will you mind if I stay even partially involved in the business and you have to entertain eight little horrors all by yourself from time to time?'

'Does that include Piers—or will he make nine?' He was laughing, but then said equally seriously, 'We'll work it out when it happens—they'll be my children too,' he assured her, gathering her tightly to him, caring, arousing, understanding her.

I love you. Jade couldn't say it aloud—her heart too full to speak so she showed him instead, her senses thrilling to the sensual teasing in the velvety voice as Kent breathed huskily, 'Besides, after looking after you, it'll be a cinch!'