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Harlequin Presents

LILIAN
PEAKE

the distant dream



THE DISTANT DREAM

Lilian Peake

When Professor Harford Tudor first invited Maretta to visit him, she looked on the invitation as coming from a kindly colleague who looked on her work as promising. After all, the professor was old enough to be her father.

So it was disconcerting, to say the least, when Professor Harford's disagreeable son Rhian began to treat her as - well, some kind of adventuress! What a ridiculous situation to be in - a bone of contention between father and son!

At least it would have been ridiculous if it hadn't become so serious - for she soon realised, to her horror, that she had fallen in love with one man, and didn't want to hurt the other. What should she do?

CHAPTER ONE

'BUT, darling,' said Josephine Newell to her daughter, 'he's really much too old for you. Older than I am, in fact.'

'Go on,' said Maretta with a smile, fastening the catches on her suitcase, 'finish the sentence. Old enough to be *your* husband, let alone mine. Won't you please understand,' her arms went briefly round her mother and she placed a light kiss on the surprisingly wrinkle-free cheek, 'that there's nothing - absolutely nothing - like that between us?'

'Then,' Josephine asked with a worried frown, 'why this invitation to stay with him during the summer vacation?'

That Maretta could not answer. She had been as puzzled by it as her mother was. With a shrug, 'I work in his department.'

'But you must admit, dear, you're a very junior member. A laboratory assistant is not very high up in the hierarchy at a university. Much as I love you, even I acknowledge that!'

Maretta sighed. 'I came to terms long ago with my limited intellect—'

'But, darling,' Josephine was all proud mother now, 'it wasn't your fault you had to leave school before completing your exams. If your dear father hadn't died—'

'I'd have got to the top. Mother dear, I've heard it all before. For heaven's sake, stop feeling guilty about my career. Next term, I promise you, I'll attend evening classes and study hard and carry on from where I left off.'

'Maretta,' the frown was firmly fixed, 'you're twenty-four. It can't be long before you—'

'Marry?' Maretta laughed. 'This is a play-back, too. I've got no one in mind. James is nice and, as you call him, clean- living and clever, but he just doesn't turn me on. So what's the use?'

'That leaves Professor Tudor, doesn't it? Don't tell me he's asked you to his home to help him with his work.'

'I wouldn't be qualified to do that.'

'Then he *must* be interested in you personally. I know the ways of men, dear.'

'Even fifty-two-year-olds?'

'Especially fifty-two-year-olds. I am, after all, forty-eight myself. And men of that age, especially widowers, as he is, have all their faculties, their feelings, their - instincts.'

Maretta laughed, hugging her mother. 'You'll be telling me about the birds and the bees next.'

There was a ring at the door bell, two precise measured rings, then silence.

'He's here,' Josephine whispered, gazing down the stairs.

'You go,' Maretta urged. 'I've just remembered I haven't packed my talc.'

She was closing her case again as the two voices drifted up to her. One was her mother's, high-pitched and hurried with welcome and a touch of diffidence - her mother had, Maretta remembered, never met a real life professor before - and the other quick and precise, reflecting the personality and thought processes of the man to whom her mother was speaking.

There was no doubt about it, her mother was a little overwhelmed at meeting such a distinguished person. The call up the stairs 'not to keep Mr. - er - Doctor - er - Professor Tudor waiting' was not only an indication of the extent of her mother's confusion, but also, to Maretta's surprise, a cry for help.

An accomplished hostess when her husband was alive - although no academic, he had been highly placed in industry - it was not often that her mother was knocked off balance in her meetings with people. It was plain that this occasion was an exception to the rule.

For two years Maretta had worked in Professor Tudor's department, considering herself fortunate in having been appointed to so distinguished a place of learning on the basis of the comparatively humble qualifications she possessed. For two years her mother had heard her talk in tones of awe of the man called Harford Tudor and she had listened with equal awe to his list of accomplishments and achievements. But that, Maretta supposed, had been in an entirely objective way, like watching a famous film actor in the cinema, admiring him yet knowing it would never be possible to meet him.

As Maretta went down the stairs, she reflected that even though he was in his early fifties, one had to admire the man. Not only did he look intelligent, with his swift, comprehending glances all round, taking in information, processing it through the natural computer of his brain and absorbing the results instantaneously, he was fine-looking, too, distinguished in feature as well as mind. He was tall, slim to the point of thinness, his quick movements hinting at agility, having across his shoulders only the merest hint of a stoop. His hair had light touches of grey and his pointed beard became him.

Maretta had remembered her mother's words of warning about a man of his age. Looking at him, there was no doubt that *this* man had all his faculties, feelings and instincts. As she hugged her mother, she remembered what else she had said. 'He must be interested in you personally.' But she laughed inwardly at such an idea.

As Maretta sank back in the passenger seat, watching the East Anglian countryside pass by, she sighed with a strange contentment. The immediate future, she felt, would be good. The distant future was too far away to worry about.

So Professor Tudor was interested in her personally, was he? She smiled at a field of grazing cattle. Mothers were always fancying things that did not exist. It had all begun because of a chance moment in the laboratory one lunch hour. She had been gazing out of the window. James was there, working at some experiment, having eaten his sandwiches quickly so that he could get back to the subject which currently absorbed him.

Maretta had said, 'What's that bird over there on the lawn, James? I'm hopeless. I can't tell a starling from a blackbird.'

'It's a blackbird, Miss Newell,' a voice had said at her side. 'If you look closely, you can tell the difference easily.'

Disconcerted, Maretta had looked up into the face of Professor Tudor. 'I'm - I'm sorry, I was talking to James. Do - do you know about bird-life, Professor?'

'In my spare time, Miss Newell,' he said gently, 'I'm an ornithologist. It's my hobby, my consuming passion. I have a large house in the country in which I live at week-ends and vacations. In the gardens - they're large and beautiful - I have a hide from which I watch the birds without myself being seen.'

From then on, Maretta had found herself becoming increasingly involved with Professor Tudor's hobby. He had even lent her a book to enable her to identify different species of birds. Once, he had returned early from lunch and had taken her for a walk in the college grounds, naming the birds they had seen and telling her of their nesting and migratory habits.

Then had come the invitation to his house. Maretta had been so surprised she had accepted on the spot. There had been no limit put on the length of her stay.

'I'll show you the hide, Miss Newell,' he had said, his face alight with anticipation. 'Under my tuition, you'll soon be as keen an ornithologist as I am!'

'He's interested in you personally,' her mother had said. How wrong her mother was! His interest in her was purely as a budding fellow-enthusiast, a newcomer, a complete novice whom he could teach and encourage and fill with some of the unbounded enthusiasm which overflowed from him.

As the drive to his home progressed, so the remoteness cast on him by his elevated position in the academic hierarchy decreased. Like a chrysalis he shed his learned skin. He became a human being. He talked of everyday things, like 'shopping at the village store when his housekeeper, Mrs. Fiske,

had left something off her list of groceries; like sunbathing in the garden and making his own lemonade, chilling it before savouring its homemade flavour.

But Maretta could not free herself completely of awe. Here she was, sitting beside the man on whom, until recently, she had looked as a great and scholarly figure, and in another world from hers. He had written books which were regarded by his contemporaries as classics in their own field, and which had been used by educational pundits as textbooks.

He was regarded as being a world authority on his particular branch of metallurgy, which was his subject. It was not for nothing that he had been appointed Professor of Metallurgy many years before, and at a comparatively early age. His paper qualifications, the letters after his name, her mother had once said, on seeing them on the department's letter heading, were enough in themselves to fill half the page, without adding another word!

Yet, Maretta thought, listening to him talk about the comforts of his home, she knew nothing at all about him as a man - except that he was a widower, and had been so for many years. He had never mentioned a family, so she assumed he did not have any.

The car turned at precisely the correct angle into the left half of a semi-circular drive, bounding a faultless lawn. The car was large, shining and blue, its metal gleaming in the late afternoon sun. But it was the house which had Maretta's eyes opened wide, at the graciousness of it, its mellowness, its age - it must have been built two hundred years before - and its size. It was constructed in red brick, the warmth of the colour being enhanced by climbing plants and by the hedges which seemed to form a barrier between the front entrance and who knew what beauties behind the great house?

'The coat of arms,' Professor Tudor pointed to the emblem above the second-floor windows, 'is not mine. It belonged to the original owner. I bought the place from one of his descendants. Her husband had died and she wished to remarry free of the encumbrance of such a large estate.' He answered her unasked question. 'I was fortunate enough to benefit under my

very rich grandfather's will, which made the necessary cash for such a house available. I admit this place is a self-indulgence, but,' with a quick smile, 'I have a weakness for beautiful possessions. Also,' he came round to open the car door, 'I can indulge my passion of bird-watching to my heart's content.'

'You don't travel from here to the university every day?' Maretta asked.

He laughed, plainly considering the question pleasingly foolish. She was, after all, his laugh said, young and consequently a little unthinking. 'No, I have an apartment near the university campus. I return here, though, every week-end.'

Maretta waited while Professor Tudor found their cases in the boot of the car. As he swept towards the porticoed entrance he said,

'Please be at your ease. I hope you'll enjoy your stay with me.' As he opened the great door, he said, smiling, 'I'm looking forward indeed to teaching an eager student new to the subject of ornithology and instilling in her the same enthusiasm and love for it that I feel myself.'

Maretta felt a touch of anxiety. Suppose she failed him in her interest, suppose it was insufficient to please him, to justify the generosity of his invitation? She vowed she would read every book he lent her, listen with the deepest concentration to every explanation he made. In that way only - how else could she repay him? - would she justify her presence in his household.-

The hall was impressive and spacious, the ceiling high, the wooden floor well polished. The scent of it, only recently applied, teased the nostrils. To one side a carpeted staircase curved upwards.

A tall slim woman came from the domestic quarters, her welcoming smile resting on Maretta. But there was accompanying it a swift, surprised opening of the eyes. She held out her hand. 'I'm Mrs. Fiske, Dr. Tudor's - Dr. Harford Tudor's - housekeeper.' The faintest emphasis on Professor Tudor's first name registered unconsciously on Maretta's mind. She disregarded it, being too bemused by events to take in anything but the obvious, the unmistakable, the immediate present.

Mrs. Fiske took Maretta's case. 'I've prepared the guest room, Professor Tudor, as you instructed.'

Harford Tudor nodded, placing a hand lightly on Maretta's shoulder. 'Dinner is at seven. However, if you wish to rest after the journey, the meal can be delayed.'

Maretta shook her head. 'An hour or two of travelling in your car is not exactly hard labour, Professor Tudor,' she laughed.

He laughed with her, the pressure of his fingers increasing a little in appreciation of the joke. 'When you've changed, please join me in the main drawing-room.'

Maretta followed Mrs. Fiske and at the curve of the staircase her head turned back involuntarily. She saw, with a shock, that the professor's eyes were following their progress. His face held a curiously thoughtful expression as they rested on her. He's thinking, Maretta told herself, will I be comfortable? Will I enjoy staying in such a great house with one lonely - lonely? - she examined her thoughts, surprised - yes, lonely man.

The bedroom was large, the fireplace and overmantel intricately carved, steeped in history. The room should have held antique furniture, ancient portraits and a canopied bed. But all it retained of its gracious past was the low-hanging crystal chandelier suspended from the centre of the patterned ceiling.

The bed was a large divan, as modern as the shops could supply. The dressing-table and wardrobe were thoughtfully designed in dark oak. The carpet was strewn with interwoven roses, the curtains carried the same flower motif as they moved in the breeze around the two large windows. A couple of fireside chairs added a touch of homeliness to the slightly awe-inspiring atmosphere.

Through a half-open door Maretta saw, with a spurt of pleasure, a glimpse of a bath. On closer investigation, she guessed that it had, in years gone by, been the dressing-room but had been converted into a private bathroom for the use of guests. A shower attachment rested on a cradle over the bath taps

and it was not long before Maretta was washing away the last cobwebs of her doubts - doubts which had troubled her since the invitation had been issued; what right had she to be there at all? - and towelling herself into a tingle of anticipation at whatever pleasures might lie ahead.

From the professor's words - 'when you have changed' - she guessed that it was his practice to dress formally for dinner. From her suitcase she lifted a floral skirt and white lace sleeveless top.

She took care with her make-up, although she did not really know why. Did she, deep down, want to impress the professor? Her pale brown hair, parted in the centre, swung to her shoulders, framing her oval face which narrowed to a delicately rounded chin. Her eyes were grey and long-lashed and there was a directness in them, an honesty which, coupled with the set of her full, wide mouth, was her most arresting characteristic.

The hall was quiet as Maretta crept down the stairs. As her foot touched the shining floorboards, she heard in the distance the murmur of busy voices and the clatter of crockery and her taste buds flowered as her nostrils caught the appetizing smell of food. A pang of hunger touched her, adding itself to the strange disturbance of her feelings. It was as if a breeze had sprung from nowhere, telling of the storm and havoc to come.

She shivered, blaming her apprehension on her need for sustenance - she had, after all, eaten nothing since lunch - and crept across the hall towards a partially opened door. Had the professor invited her to join him in the dining- room or the drawing-room? If he was not there, she would retreat as fast as she could and turn another of the many handles, try another door.

He was not there, but she did not retreat. The room was not empty. Standing at a window and staring out was the figure of a man, tall, broad-shouldered, his light brown hair curling slightly as it touched the collar of his striped shirt. One hand rested in a trouser pocket, the other held a glass. Maretta had crept in so softly, he had not heard. If she held her breath, she thought, and retreated from the room backwards, without even turning round, would she escape unseen?

But the lift of a foot must have given her away. He turned. After the first astonishment had hit him, apparently stilling the working of his lungs and lifting his eyelids until his unbelieving eyes were staring with a kind of muted horror, his gaze narrowed considerably, his thick brown brows descending into a puzzled frown. The nose on that face was long and straight, the mouth wide, the lips stamped with cynicism and - could it be? - a twist of bitterness.

Maretta, as if caught in an unlawful act, pulled the errant foot from behind her to rest by the side of the other. Who was this man, and why should he have the power to implant in her, like a packet of carelessly sown seeds, an uncontrollable flowering of guilt? The grey jacket hung perfectly, draping over wide-boned hips, the trousers were cut to reveal long, lean legs. The tie was dark red, to match the stripe in the shirt.

It was plain he would not be the first to speak, so she would have to begin the conversation. What was it about her that displeased him so? Was her lace blouse too revealing? Did her eyelids carry too much eye-shadow? Were her lips too red? She felt for a crazy moment that she had come to the wrong house, but common sense stabilized her seesawing brain. This was Professor Tudor's residence, he had brought her here and she had every right to stay, whatever might be the curiously unwelcome message in the quizzical grey eyes of this stranger.

'I'm - I'm sorry.' It was all she could think of to say. He was staring at her so accusingly she felt the need to apologize. 'I'll - I'll go,' she murmured, backing away. 'I had no intention of disturbing—'

'So you are my father's friend?'

'Friend'? A *friend* of Professor Tudor's? She shook her head. She could lay no claim to such an exalted state. Then it struck her - 'my father', he had said. So Professor Tudor had a son? Her astonishment must have shown.

'Did he not tell you about me?' The voice was drawling, acid in its tone. 'That doesn't surprise me. He's been trying for thirty-two years to forget—'

Forget what? The sentence was not completed. The speaker had changed his mind. But forget? Forget this man? Who could ever, having once met him, thrust him out of mind?

'I'll say this for him,' Professor Tudor's son went on, 'he has—' a long pause in which the cool eyes examined her like a diamond merchant examining a precious stone for flaws, 'taste'. The speaker omitted to say whether that taste was good or bad. He leaned back cross-legged against the windowsill, throwing a mouthful of liquid down his throat, swallowing it and savouring the after-taste. 'He may be lacking in common sense. He may even be - indiscreet. But taste he has.' There was no doubt about it - Marett tightened under the hard eyes - his examination of her had revealed flaws in plenty.

She stiffened even more, and noted with irritation that the tauter she grew, the more relaxed he became. 'I'm sorry, Mr. Tudor, but if I knew what you were talking about—'

'Rhian's the name,' he drawled. 'Any friend of my father's is a friend of mine. Let me get you a drink,' he continued smoothly, lifting himself into a standing position and moving across the room to a table on which stood an assortment of bottles.

'I tell you,' she addressed his back furiously, 'I am *not* a friend, I work in your father's department—'

'You surprise me.' He turned, holding out a glass. 'Sherry.' She accepted it with a murmured thanks. 'I drink the harder stuff.' He refilled his own glass, shooting a spurt of soda into it. He draped himself against the table, half-sitting on it. 'You're learned as well as decorative? You have qualifications good enough to come up to my father's extremely high standards? He usually demands that only the best brains should work under him. Tell me,' his gaze wandered indolently over her, 'how good is your brain?' It was plain by the path his eyes were taking that he was interested in other things besides her brain.

'I'm a laboratory assistant,' she said flatly, but wishing with all her heart that she had been able to bring to his eyes the light of admiration and respect for

her intellectual ability, wiping out of them that barely concealed contempt in which, for some unfathomable reason, he seemed to hold her.

At her statement he burst out laughing. 'A laboratory assistant?'

Her face flamed and she felt dangerously near to tears.

'That's rich! Like the prince and the beggar maid, brought up to date. The professor and the little lab assistant.'

Her lip trembled and for a moment he watched her. The smile had gone and a thoughtful, considering look took its place. As she turned away, seeking for a place to put her glass, he moved to stand beside her. 'No, no.' His hand rested on her arm. 'We must drink a toast.'

Like a water diviner in a drought, she searched for her dignity, scraping a little from beneath the surface of her crumbled composure. 'I would rather not drink with you, thank you.'

'Come,' there was a curious quality in his smile, 'our future may be more interwoven than we realize. Who knows what fate may hold in store?' He held up his glass, looking into the golden liquid it contained as if into a crystal ball. 'I'll take a guess, an inspired guess. But I shall keep my guess a secret. To the future, Miss—?' His raised eyebrows invited her answer. 'Newell.'

'Miss Newell. To the incredible, unbelievable future.'

'Mr. Tudor, I—' but their glasses chinked, his chasing and catching hers.

As they drank, a voice said from the door, '*Doctor* Tudor, Maretta, my dear, Doctor Rhian Tudor.'

Bewildered, Maretta turned to greet her host. '*Doctor* Tudor? *Two* Doctor Tudors?'

'Confusing, isn't it?' the son drawled. 'Ph.D.s, Doctors of Philosophy, both of us. It runs in the family.'

'My son's qualifications,' said the father, his hand on Marett's shoulder, 'are equal to mine.'

'Only our subjects differ,' said the son.

'But we're both scientists.'

'My father, as you know, is a metallurgist.'

'And my son is a geologist.'

So this man was as clever as his father, his brains as brilliant, his perception as keen, his thoughts as quick-fire. But was he also as shrewd and discerning, did he possess his father's maturity of outlook and understanding?

Looking at him, at his knowledgeable eyes, his arrogant self-assurance, his thorough self-knowledge - yes, Marett decided, Dr. Rhian Tudor certainly was mature. Experienced, too, in the ways of the world - and women. But understanding, sympathy, consideration? None at all, she concluded, looking momentarily into the calculating grey eyes. He was the kind who would take but never give, demand but never concede. A mocking, questing eyebrow jerked her from her reverie. Confused, she stared into her empty glass. No wonder he had laughed at her comparatively lowly status at the university. To a man as clever as this one, a laboratory assistant would rank little higher than a girl who made the tea.

'You're lost in thought, Miss Newell,' Professor Tudor's son went on. 'Does it worry you to be spending some of your vacation in the company of two intellectual giants? If so, relax. At home as we are now, we're two simple-minded men, no more, no less. Almost human, in fact,' the lips smiled, the eyes stayed unmoved, 'especially in the presence of a woman.'

So this was Rhian Tudor's home, as well as his father's? And his stay here would be coinciding with hers? The thought disturbed and dismayed her. One Doctor Tudor she could cope with, but two ...

'Another drink, Marett?' Harford Tudor asked.

Rhian, without waiting for her reply, took the glass from her hand. 'I'll get it. You, Father?'

'The usual, thanks.' Professor Tudor invited Maretta to take the seat beside him on the settee. As she sat down, he neatened the cushion behind her, and acted generally with the eagerness of someone wishing to please. His smile was questioning. 'You're comfortable, my dear? Would you like another cushion?'

The son stood in front of her, holding out a drink. As her eyes ran the length of him to rest on his face, she found a smile there as different from his father's as a kitten from a tiger.

The words he spoke were as taunting as the smile. 'Would you like the housekeeper to bring you a footstool, Miss Newell? Would you like us to engage the services of a lady's maid for the duration of your stay? Would you like a red carpet unrolled for you wherever you walk?'

'Rhian!' There was no mistaking it, Harford Tudor's voice held a distinct tremor, a tremor of anger, not of sorrow.

It was then that Maretta, flushing at the pinpricks of the younger man's taunting, sensed that all was not well between Professor Tudor and his clever son.

'How - how old is the house?' Maretta asked her host, ignoring the man who had not moved from his position in front of her.

'About two hundred and fifty years. This room was remodelled early last century and divided into two. I use the other as a study.'

Maretta looked about her, seeing the open fireplace, no longer in use, judging by the radiators along the walls. The centrepiece of the ceiling was carved to represent leaves. The walls were wood-panelled. The only modern touch in the room was an inscrutable modern painting over the fireplace. In the bedroom, the past had been swept away. Here, apart from the painting, the past had been allowed to live on.

'This settee is Chippendale,' Harford Tudor said, 'the bookcase over there is Georgian. The small table on which the drinks are standing is walnut, eighteenth century. Mirror, Queen Anne. Many of the items were purchased with the house.'

'It's all beautiful,' Maretta said, her eyes roaming round the room.

'It has the grace of simplicity,' said Harford, 'unlike many houses of this age. Which is one of the reasons why I bought it. Simplicity appeals to me.'

Was it her imagination, Maretta wondered, or did his eyes linger on her face?

'It soothes my father's tortuous, complex brain,' said the son, his voice heavy with sarcasm. 'Hence his—' He checked himself abruptly. Had he met the challenge of his father's look? 'You like old things, Miss Newell?' There seemed to be the faintest trace of emphasis on the word 'old'.

She looked up sharply, and once again met the taunt of that smile.

'There's usually a shop window between myself and any piece of antique furniture, Dr. Tudor.' Her fingers rubbed lightly over the polished wooden arm of the settee.

'You have no money to spare for luxuries?'

'As I told you, I'm only a lab assistant.' She would not meet his eyes.

'Your parents - they aren't in the higher income bracket?'

'Rhian, you really shouldn't—'

Maretta broke in, 'My father died some years ago. I live with my mother.' She met his eyes, a challenging smile touching her mouth. 'Continue with your questioning, Dr. Tudor.'

He threw back his head and laughed. After a sip or two of his drink, and a brooding contemplation of the object of his curiosity, he said, 'I'll take you at

your word. I'll ask another question. Aren't you a little - shall we say - old to be a laboratory assistant?'

'Old, Rhian? What are you talking about? She's only twenty-four. Some of our laboratory assistants are much older than Maretta.'

Rhian's narrowed eyes did not leave Maretta's face. 'Perhaps I should have worded the question differently. Perhaps I should have said, aren't you a little old to be unmarried? You're not,' a considered pause, 'unattractive. There's something about you that might interest a man—'

'Rhian!' Professor Tudor stood abruptly. There was no doubting now the anger he was feeling. It was almost as though his son had abused something venerated, revered ...

Maretta could not remain seated under the insulting scrutiny of Professor Tudor's arrogant son. She stood, but she had to tilt her face upwards at a sharp angle to look at him. Her eyes blazed. 'I haven't yet met a man who has impressed me sufficiently to make me think in terms of joining the rest of my life to his.'

'No?'

'No!'

The dinner gong reverberated, demanding attention, sending its message into every room in the house, its promise of harmony around a table, of candlelight catching the crystal wine glasses and, in the right company, of good conversation.

It was all as she had thought it would be. The table was dark oak and long enough to seat six comfortably, so that three looked lost at it. The dining chairs, the professor explained, were reproduction furniture in oak and leather. These he had bought himself to fit in with the surroundings. The fender around the fireplace was also a reproduction, of an eighteenth-century model. But the sideboard and small oak cabinet were early eighteenth century.

The cutlery shone as Maretta had thought it would, the place mats were woven, the glasses gleamed. The meal was served briskly by Mrs. Fiske, the wine dispensed by Professor Tudor himself. For much of the time his son remained silent, his face without expression, all his concentration seemingly on the food he was eating.

But he could not have missed the attention his father was lavishing on their guest. Harford Tudor asked Maretta repeatedly if the food was to her liking; was there anything else she would rather have, was there too much or too little of everything Mrs. Fiske had given her?

Maretta had been seated on Professor Tudor's right, and she had not once raised her eyes to meet those of the man opposite her. But when, towards the end of the meal, as Professor Tudor refilled the glasses and proposed a toast, she was forced to do so.

'To my young friend, Maretta,' he said, raising his glass high and touching it to Maretta's. As he held out his glass to his son, it was not met immediately. But Rhian Tudor seemed, after a moment's struggle, to overcome his objections and supported his father's toast. The hesitation had creased Harford Tudor's brows.

'Miss Newell,' Rhian said.

Maretta, with deliberation, echoed Rhian Tudor's hesitation. For a few seconds she appeared locked in an internal struggle, then she raised her glass to Rhian's, although she had no intention of touching his. He, it seemed, had other ideas. He leaned across and grasped her wrist, bringing her glass within touching distance of his own. Then, with his fingers still holding hers firmly, their glasses made contact, rim to rim.

Their eyes battled, giving the lie to the message of peace and benevolence which all toasts contain. Maretta pulled in her lips. She would not give in. Slowly, carefully so as not to spill a drop. Rhian forced her hand away from her across the table until it was near enough for him to drink from his glass.

He said, with a glint, 'To my father's young - very young - friend.' After which he released her hand, having undoubtedly won the battle.

But still it seemed he was not satisfied. He addressed his father. 'Miss Newell denies she's a friend of yours.' Why did he appear intent on taunting his father? Maretta, glancing anxiously at Professor Tudor, saw the displeasure, already aroused by Rhian's strangely provocative by-play in seizing her hand, increase at his son's words. 'In fact,' Rhian went on, 'when I called her your "friend" she seemed indignant. She insists she's merely one of your very minor subordinates who works in your department.'

Rhian sent his father a testing glance. React to that, it seemed to say.

Harford Tudor considered his reply with care. He turned his empty coffee cup, replaced it centrally on the saucer, picked up the spoon and appeared to study its metal content. Then he put it down, stroked his beard and said at last,

'Subordinate? No, I prefer the word assistant. Very minor? On the contrary, a vital link in the chain of learning, the very foundation on which the department - any scientific department - is based, as necessary as the humble "hard core", the broken bricks and rubble on which even the greatest of buildings is erected.'

Maretta laughed, colouring a little. 'You're flattering me, Professor Tudor.' She was conscious of the son's deep interest. 'If I were away—'

'Someone else,' the professor interrupted, 'would have to be found to take your place. In any case, I'm convinced, as a result of my - so far - somewhat slim acquaintance with you, that your brain potential is much greater than you would have me, or anyone else, believe.'

..'It's kind of you, but—'

'*Kind*}' Now the professor seemed angry with her. 'I am not speaking out of kindness. I've come to my conclusions as a result of observation and objective thought.'

'You've insulted my father's scientific integrity, Miss Newell,' came a jeering murmur from across the table. 'You see,' he drawled, 'a scientist thinks objectively, disinterestedly, on all subjects. He holds any given

problem away from him and considers it as a thing apart. Even his emotions, his feelings, his - love, if he should be unfortunate enough to allow himself to succumb to such a sensation,' with a quick, mocking smile, 'he projects away from him and considers coolly, impartially - scientifically. Take it from me, as a scientist I know by experience.'

'By *experience*, Dr. Tudor?' Maretta flung back. 'I'm astonished that you could ever have been so unthinking, so *unscientific* as to allow yourself to develop a feeling of love for any other human being - except yourself.'

The narrowed eyes, the tightened mouth, the face devoid of all emotion except a savage cynicism turned Maretta cold, despite the warmth of the evening sun filling the ' windows and gilding the walls.

The father laughed, his good humour restored. The son had been vanquished. 'How well,' he said, 'you have summed him up, Maretta. He has had - how do you young people say it now? - his affairs. But as he confessed to me once, love has never touched him. Love of the other sort, yes, for a man of his age that goes without saying. But love in the warm, passionate sense of the word, no. It's just as well he has never married. He doesn't know what the word "faithfulness" means.'

Their glances clashed. Now father and son did battle. It was plain their mutual bitterness went deep. That each was wounded was plain. That each tried their best to disguise that wound was, to Maretta's dismayed eyes, even plainer.

Her heart pounded as if she were the cause of their discord, as if she were transported back into the past centuries and was watching a duel between two men for her honour. But she knew that this bitter feud had begun long before she made her appearance on the scene. She also knew, by instinct, by a certain intuition, that her arrival at the house had somehow exacerbated the quarrel, and the knowledge made her strangely frightened.

CHAPTER TWO

MRS. FISKE came in with more coffee, which they all refused. But it served to break the deadly silence.

Professor Tudor pushed back his chair, bowing a little to Maretta. 'I'm sure you will excuse me, my dear.' His eyes swung, lost with longing, towards the windows, like a prisoner counting the moments until he is free. 'I've been away from my home longer than usual. I must get down to my hide near the stream which runs through the estate.'

His hand lingered momentarily on her arm, then he was gone.

'So,' softly, 'my father has left me holding the baby.' The way his voice lingered over the final word had the colour rushing to her cheeks. 'What shall I do with her?' His eyes left her in no doubt as to the track his thoughts were taking. A well-worn track, Maretta thought, along which nine women out of ten would run towards him with open arms. Well, she told herself furiously, I'll be the tenth, the odd one out. I'll stay right here where I am, I'll not take one step, either mentally or physically, towards that man!

He wandered round the table and as he approached, Maretta stood and pushed in her chair. She refused to remain seated, giving him the advantage of so much more height. It was bad enough having to look up into his face even when they were both standing. This she now did, with fire in her eyes.

'Please don't worry about me, Dr. Tudor. As far as I'm concerned, you can go about your work or play as if I didn't exist.'

'My work can wait and my "play" is hardly the kind of which you - or my father - would approve.' Again she resented the taunting smile. She turned her back on him and talked to the door.

'Where are you going?'

'To my room. I have cases to unpack.'

'Do that later. Have you seen the house? I'll take you over

it.' His tone, a little sharp now, forced her to agree.

He joined her at the door, his hand resting lightly on her arm where his father's had fleetingly touched her. The father had not produced the slightest response, but the momentary contact with the son had her tense, prickling and retreating out of reach. Her exaggerated recoil did not pass him by, and he did not trouble to hide his cool amusement.

'Let me lead the way,' he said, preceding her into the hall.

Rhian pushed open a heavy panelled door which creaked with age. 'This is my father's study.' It had, as Professor Tudor had said, been formed by separating it from the drawing-room. As Marettta looked around she concluded that the professor's untidy habits must be the despair of his housekeeper. But in spite of the papers scattered about, the piles of magazines, the desk littered with books, pencils and drawings of birds, the room had a dignity all its own. The fact that it had once been a part of a larger, grander room had not been completely lost.

'I don't propose,' Rhian said, 'to go round the furniture dating it and pinpointing its antiquity, as my father did. Nor am I the connoisseur he is of antiques. I deal in age, of course, through my subject, but of a very different nature.'

He closed the door and opened another. 'This was once known as the parlour. Here you might feel the past lives on. My father insists on preserving it as he imagines it used to be. He refused to desecrate, as he called it, the atmosphere.'

Marettta's eyes lifted to the ceiling, whose mouldings were intricate, to the central chandelier with its glinting crystal, to the table and chairs whose antique value must have been great. Where portraits of former owners must once have hung were two others. One was of Professor Tudor himself, as a man in his thirties. The other was of Rhian Tudor, probably painted ten years before, when he was in his early twenties.

For some time, Marettta gazed at the painting of the man who stood beside her. When she was looking at his image rather than his substance, she found

it easier to look into his eyes, but even so the painted ones, coldly assessing even at that age, made hers falter and fall away.

Maretta looked around. There was something missing and she could not for a moment identify what was wrong. Then she knew. She turned her head and looked up at him, into the cool eyes, the real eyes, and their expression was neutral and withdrawn. Had he guessed the question she was about to ask?

'There's no picture of your—'

'My mother died a few hours after I was born.' The words were spoken with chilling indifference. They were a statement of fact, no more. Maretta wanted to ask why, how? Who brought you up? Who nursed you as a baby, played the games of childhood with you, gave you warmth and love? Not, she told herself with surprising sadness, his father. The feud that seemed to exist between them had its roots deep in the past. Then she checked the compassion rising within her. Why should she feel anything for this passionless, unemotional man beside her? She was there as a friend - no, an acquaintance - of his father's. Until she had arrived in Professor Tudor's house, she had not even known he had a son.

'Well,' the eyebrows were raised, the sardonic, handsome features unsmiling, 'have you looked your fill at the family portraits? Do you wish with all your heart that my father were the age now that he was when that picture was painted?'

Her face flamed. 'I don't know what you're implying, Dr. Tudor-'

'Shall we move on?' He was ripping through her anger like a shark's fin through wind-whipped waves. The rough seas of emotion - even emotion he had aroused in others - did not disturb him. Whatever the situation, he seemed to be the master, the aggressor, the killer in cold blood. No matter what the circumstance, he was in control.

They walked up the stairs, Rhian a step or two in front of her. He did not attempt to speak. They passed a door and Rhian gestured.

'My father's room.' He obviously had no intention of showing her the interior. They came to another door. 'Mrs. Fiske's room.'

He turned the handle of a door along the passage, inviting Maretta to follow. He smiled slightly. 'Mrs. Fiske has given me up. When I'm at home, she makes no attempt to keep my room in the impeccable tidiness in which she keeps it in my absence.'

The bedroom was large, as were all the other rooms, but it had been tamed from the gracious dignity conferred upon it by the passing of over two centuries, into a living-room, sleeping-room and work-room combined. The personality of the man was stamped upon it as no doubt, Maretta thought, he would stamp - 'brand', she reflected with a touch of spite, would probably be more accurate - all his possessions, whether they were inanimate objects like the scattered desk, the coffee-coloured leather armchairs, the large modern bed; or whether they were the living, breathing women in his life. They all bore his mark - 'Rhian Tudor has used me.'

He pulled off his jacket and threw himself full-length on the bed, loosening his tie and resting his head on his hands. He watched her bemusedly, eyes half-closed, mouth slightly curved. At the same time as her body burned under his regard, so she became pulsingly aware of his overpowering attraction. It was not only his good looks. It was his length, his breadth, his taunting, enticing persuasive strength. She felt he was drawing her towards him with his mind, concentrating with all his considerable mental powers on impelling her to the bed, so that all he had to do was reach out, pull her down and...

Furious with herself, with her rising, tell-tale colour, she turned away. He was not ignorant of her struggle. He *knew* what she was feeling!

'No?' came the soft, inciting whisper from the bed.

'No!'

She walked to the window, gazing out at the far-reaching estate.

'In my experience,' he murmured, 'women are not usually difficult to get. With some it may take a little time, a little coaxing—'

'Then I'm quite different from the women you seem to know.'

'No woman,' he mused, his eyes closed, 'is "different." These days you have only to do that,' he clicked his fingers, 'and they come, sidling up to you and arching their fur against you, asking for it.'

'And of course,' she frowned at the terraced slopes, the winding paths, 'they get it?'

'I'm a man,' was the laconic reply. There was a pause, then, 'Tell me, did you believe what my father said about me at dinner?'

'That love has never touched you, real love? That you haven't any warmth or passion, any deep feeling? Yes, of course. And your behaviour since I met you has given me no reason to believe otherwise. I usually read other people's characters,' she commented with a touch of smugness, 'very quickly.'

He laughed loudly, his eyes, open now, mocking her. 'The little lab assistant turns into psycho-analyst at the touch of a button! You can read my father, too, as well as you can "read" me? You've unravelled the intricacies of his brain, you've fathomed his motives, his dearest wishes? You know all about his secret dreams?'

He was laughing at her and she smarted under his mockery. She made for the door. 'If there's nothing more to see—'

He got up from the bed and tightened his dark red tie. 'One more place, one floor higher.'

At the end of the landing, a passageway led to a short flight of stairs. There seemed to be only one room up there, a spacious attic room. He flung the door wide.

"My study, when I'm at home, where I work and brood upon the distant past, where I think about Ice Ages and glacial periods, not to mention rocks and minerals and fossils."

.. It was the equipment Maretta noticed first. The room reminded her a little of the laboratory in which she worked, so full was it of microscopes and tools and pieces of rock. She found him studying her face with some amusement.

'You look surprised.'

'I am. All these intimidating instruments. I thought geologists dug for their treasure.'

'You thought you'd find a fork and spade up here?' He laughed at the idea. 'You're making a not uncommon mistake of confusing geology with archaeology. Archaeologists work in thousands of years, geologists in hundreds of millions, even thousands of millions of years. This,' he indicated with a wave of his hand, 'is a petrological microscope. It magnifies and illuminates the objects viewed through its tube. I won't explain further because it's a complex instrument which the ordinary person wouldn't easily understand, not even a laboratory assistant to the great Professor Tudor.' He smiled sarcastically. 'Incidentally, petrology is the study of rocks.' He moved towards another piece of equipment. 'This is a photo-microscope, rather like the other one but fitted with a camera. I photograph details of minerals and rocks. It saves me the trouble of drawing minute details.'

'These wonderful fossils!' Maretta turned to him, her eyes bright. 'Where did you find them?'

'All over the world. I lead a somewhat nomadic life.'

Surprised, she said, 'So you don't teach?'

'No, I'm neither teacher nor lecturer. I leave the academic world to my illustrious father. I utilize the knowledge I have acquired, I don't pass it on as he does. Incidentally, I'm primarily a geophysicist.'

'But your father called you a geologist.'

'I am, basically. But I took further degrees in the subject.'

'So you really are bright, like your father!'

He bowed low.

Risking rebuff, she asked, 'Where do you work?'

He smiled. 'The world is my work place.' Marett frowned. 'Perhaps you'd understand me better if I told you I work for an oil company, an American-owned oil company. As a geophysicist, I visit different parts of the world prospecting for oil. I'm in charge of a team of men.'

'Then why are you here?'

'I've just come back from Alaska. I have two months' leave and at the same time I'm writing up the report on my findings for my employers. I've got the data, the pictures, samples of rock and so on. Now I must assemble all the facts and figures and advise on whether I consider it worth my company's while to set up an oil rig and everything else that goes with it.'

'Quite a responsibility.'

'It is, but that's what I'm paid for - very well paid for, I might say.'

'So you have to travel wherever they send you? Your work isn't just theoretical?'

'No. Believe it or not, unlike my academic father I actually get my hands dirty. I handle rock samples, analyse them and so on.' He looked down at himself. 'I not only get my hands dirty, I have also to dress appropriately.'

She had a flashing picture of him in safety helmet, boots, old clothes, perhaps even mud-stained. The thought intrigued - and for some reason excited - her. There was another, rougher side to the man other than the suave, impeccably dressed image that he was at that moment presenting.

'You - you don't mind the nomadic sort of life you lead?'

He lifted his shoulders. 'Why should I? I have no ties, no wife and kids, no responsibilities other than my work.' He smiled, and Maretta knew it was a prelude to a pinprick. 'I'm worry-free, woman-free. I have money, plenty of it. I do work I love. I see the world. What else could I ask of life?'

Her hand stretched out to touch one of the microscopes. 'Haven't you even got a girl-friend?'

A long-fingered hand gripped her wrist and pulled her hand away from the instrument she was touching. She jerked irritably and snapped, 'I know about equipment. I wouldn't harm it.'

He inclined his head. 'But I doubt if you handle equipment in this exclusive category. In answer to your question, what man - male man - doesn't get himself a girl-friend?' He smiled provocatively. 'A biological need. Yes, I have a woman friend.'

'And,' for some reason her throat closed up a little, 'and you'll be marrying her one day when you settle down?'

He picked up a rock fossil from his desk, examined it closely and put it down again. 'I have no plans to marry anyone or to settle down. No woman features in my future. No woman would tolerate the kind of life I lead.'

'A - a biological need, you said?' she murmured, with an ingenuous smile.

'I don't find it difficult to satisfy my needs in that respect. There are always women around. On site they may be scarce, but a man has time off, and a man knows what to do with it.'

She turned away, suddenly sickened by their conversation. 'Compared with you,' the words came out oddly bitter, 'your father's an absolute angel.'

'Let me assure my father's little lab assistant,' he said softly, 'my father, in that respect, *is* an angel. He sublimates any male desires he might experience - notice I say "might" because he gives no external evidence of any such

yearnings - by his love of his work, his ornithology, his—' He broke off and even her questioning eyes raised to his did not persuade him to continue.

'Tell me,' he lifted a handful of her hair and when she shook her head petulantly, let the strands of hair fall back, 'what does this lab assistant do in the course of earning her living?'

'Surely you know. You must have been in a laboratory many times. I set up equipment for the students to carry out experiments, I take measurements in the form of graphs and so on. I monitor research, things like stress in metal.'

'Ah, yes, metal fatigue which causes air crashes, collapse of bridges and so on. My father's territory, not mine.' He leant back against the desk, arms folded, considering her. He did not spare her, taking in her physical as well as her facial attractions. 'You interest me. In there,' he moved an arm and tapped her head, at which she recoiled - did he keep touching her on purpose? she wondered angrily - 'I'm sure is a brain worthy of attention, capable of development and constructive thought, a brain which could, if properly trained, make a real and positive contribution to mankind. Why, at twenty-four, are you little more than a semi-skilled worker when you could, I'm convinced, have been working on the right side, as against the wrong side, of the laboratory bench, initiating your own experiments instead of merely supplying the equipment for other people's? What went wrong?'

She glanced at the books on shelves around the room. 'When my father died, I had to break off my studies.' Since she had her back to the man, she could not tell what he was thinking. 'I'm hoping, in the autumn, to go to classes and work for better qualifications part-time.'

'Why not do it full-time? Much quicker that way.'

Shaking her head, she replied, 'My mother works, but her money is not enough for us both to manage on. I can't give up my job. If it takes me a long time to qualify, I shall just have to persevere.'

'I'll have my own back and ask you the same question as you asked me. Any boy-friend?'

She half-turned, ready to resent his invasion into her private life, then remembered hers into his. She thought of James, an academic like Professor Tudor, but much lower down the scale. He was clever enough, however, to be well regarded by the professor. James seemed to be motivated solely by his work and because she, Maretta, was part of it through her job in the laboratory, because she knew enough to value his ideas and ability, he was beginning to regard her as part of his life, too.

They went out together sometimes, and their talk - his talk, mostly - was of work and more work. He kissed her occasionally, but she had the feeling that even at the moment their lips met, his mind was at the bench, solving some difficult problem. But, not to be outdone by the man who was Professor Tudor's son, she replied, without answering the question directly.

'His name is James Heston. He's twenty-seven, tall, thin, dedicated to his work, and he's a lecturer in your father's department.'

..'And you're serious about him? You plan to marry?'

If she had been truthful she would have said, 'No.' But for some reason she did not want to tell this man the truth. So she manufactured an elaborate shrug. 'Possibly. Who knows?'

'I thought you alleged over dinner that you haven't as yet met any man with whom you would want to join up permanently?'

He had almost caught her out. 'Well, I - I—' He seemed to be waiting. 'James,' she improvised, 'is the nearest any man has yet come to my ideal.'

'Lucky James,' he jeered. 'Does he know of his good fortune?' She pressed her lips together. Had he called her bluff? 'When are you going to ask him to marry you?'

Her hand shot out to close on one of his rock specimens. It seemed to move of its own accord, determined by its own methods to get even with this sneering, impossible man. What that hand would have done with that piece of rock had it been allowed to lift it from its position on a shelf, Maretta

would never know because another, stronger hand had, for the third time that evening, fastened round her wrist. And this time it showed no mercy.

'Drop it!' he ordered, as if he were addressing a disobedient dog.

The hand holding the rock obeyed. In self-defence it had to, before those savage nails left a row of permanent indentations in her flesh. It seemed that the release of the rock was not enough, because the fingers stayed where they were.

Maretta choked out an apology and as he released her, felt the blood gush to and fro along her arm again. Her colour was high as she rubbed her bruised skin. 'You've stopped questioning me,' she said, doing her best to overcome her humiliating defeat and sound sarcastic. 'Surely there must be many more things you would like to know?'

He looked at the full lips pouting a little with vexation. He dwelt for long moments on the swelling shape beneath the lace top, the neat hips under the long straight skirt. 'Yes, but I doubt if you would tell me. Whether, for instance, the innocence of your body matches up to the innocence in your face.'

Her colour rose again and in case he mistook it for embarrassment instead of the anger it really signified, she said sharply, 'For a man I've only met today, you're asking some extremely personal questions. Suppose I asked you about your - innocence?'

'My dear girl,' he drawled, 'I lost that years ago. You won't find a roving, hard-living oil man ignorant of the practical side of the facts of life.'

Why did it nettle her so when he revealed this rough, tough side of him? As he stood there, elbow resting negligently on a shelf beside a precious collection of fossils, his clothes cut to fit, his light brown hair darkening as the daylight lessened, his good features brought to intense life by the swiftly comprehending, intelligent eyes; looking at the books around the room telling of culture, of deep and constant study, of his obvious appreciation of the arts as well as science, it was almost impossible to visualize the man in any other surroundings than an academic one.

Yet he had disclaimed, almost sneeringly, any connection with the academic world. He had told her, with a certain relish, an almost provocative pleasure, that he was a wanderer, loving his freedom, and the women who strayed across his path - women who were taken, thrown aside like useless pieces of rock, and forgotten for ever.

Why did the man trouble her so? It was by his father's kindness that she found herself there at all, his father who, she told herself viciously, was worth two of this man; his father, who was so good, so kind, so gentle ...

Rhian looked at her now and then as she stood silent, thinking. But he turned a rock specimen in his hands and did not break into her thoughts. When she wandered to the window, he put aside the piece of rock and followed her.

'The view,' she murmured, 'it's breathtaking! You can see such a long way, so far into the distance.'

'Which is why this house is called Horizon Hall. See,' he pointed while his other hand rested on her shoulder and she had to fight herself to concentrate on the world outside, 'across the fields and streams - the horizon.'

Maretta gazed, filled with awe, at the view. The subtle colours - the greens, browns and yellows, soothed the eyes. In one direction the landscape was dotted with farms. In the other, there were low-backed hills and field upon field of flat, patchwork land. In the distance, blue-grey now that twilight was shadowing the countryside, was the long, thin line of the sea.

'No wonder,' she murmured, half to* herself, 'you've chosen this room as your study. It's the best room in the house.'

'I'm glad you appreciate its finer points, and have overlooked the mess.'

'Mess?' She looked around. 'I didn't even notice until you pointed it out.'

He laughed. 'A woman in a thousand. Most of your sex would tut and strain to get their hands on my "rubbish" as Mrs. Fiske calls it. But you - you don't even see it.'

'Does your - your girl-friend call it rubbish?' She waited tautly for his reply.

'My girl-friend is a geologist, too.' Which fully answered Maretta's question. 'She's a teacher,' he went on, 'at a large school in Suffolk.'

Why, Maretta wondered, did the landscape darken suddenly? It must be, she decided, because the sun had set and had slipped below the horizon.

Rhian stood behind her, gazing out. 'Whenever I come up here,' he murmured, 'all the tension inside me is released. As I look out at that infinity of space, I feel an incredible sense of freedom.'

Freedom, there it was again, that freedom he so loved. Maretta looked out, too, at the distant, fading horizon, and wondered what lay beyond it.

Mrs. Fiske provided a late night drink of hot chocolate in the drawing-room. Rhian was sprawled in an armchair, while his father shared the settee with Maretta.

Professor Tudor had not changed from the suit he had been wearing before they left the university. He had hurried straight out to the hide in the gardens, to his telescope and his lonely observations. Odd how father and son differed. The one liked solitude and lurking in small secret places, watching the birds in their unrestricted freedom. The other demanded that freedom for himself, prized it, it seemed, beyond all else, disliking closed-in spaces, the stifling atmosphere of the academic world, the restrictions imposed by entangled emotions, a woman's emotions, a woman's love.

Sitting next to Harford Tudor, being nearer to him than she ever was in the course of her work, Maretta noticed details about him that had escaped her before. There were his shirt cuffs, a little frayed, in need of washing, shoes without a shine, a style of dressing of half a decade before. It brought him down from the pedestal on which she had subconsciously placed him, the pedestal of position and status, the heights to which his brilliance of mind had lifted him above all the other men she knew. But it made him more

human and approachable, stirring within her a kind of compassionate affection.

And there was his son, immaculate, as up-to-date in his clothes as it was possible to be, his proximity making him, strangely, more out of reach, his nearness enlarging instead of diminishing his remoteness, his untouchability. He aroused within her no sympathy as his father did, only a vague disturbance, a troubled, restless sensation, even, underneath it all, a hazy kind of anger.

The son, twenty years younger than his father, possessed an adulthood which the older man, for all that he had been married and had had a son, did not have. Maretta had the feeling that Rhian Tudor's emotions had been weathered and eroded by bitterness, disillusionment and a self-defensive cynicism. Had the growing, formative years without the sheltering barrier of a mother been the cause? Or had it been the puzzling, long-standing feud between father and son?

Professor Tudor offered Maretta more chocolate from the jug, pouring it into her cup. He asked if she were comfortable, if there was anything she required. He apologized for having neglected her, for not having been able to resist visiting his hide in the woods in the grounds.

He said - and he was as fluent and as voluble as if he had drunk alcohol instead of hot chocolate - how much he appreciated her having accepted his invitation to stay with him and thanked her for the gift of her company. He told her how much younger she made him feel and how he hoped she would not want to rush home too soon. He spoke so sincerely she experienced again a stirring of anxiety. She must do her best not to fail him, and to take a genuine interest in the subject of bird-life which meant so much to him.

'I think,' he mused, staring at the elaborate fire screen which covered the empty grate, 'there's such a difference in our ages, such a wide gulf of years that it was presumptuous of me to call you "my friend". Or,' a little childlike now, 'do you not object to the term, Maretta? Do you mind being called my friend?'

Such humility from so gifted a man moved her almost to tears. She shook her head immediately and saw his smile of relief. Her eyes went of their own accord to the professor's son who sat, long-legged and reclining in the armchair. His eyes were closed, his head was resting against the back of the chair. He was listening, Maretta knew by the taut facial muscles, the hard line of his lips.

'Why,' she said, hoping to reassure the professor further, 'should the years between any two people form a barrier to friendship?' There was more than relief in the professor's eyes, there was a touching gratitude. 'Why,* she went on, 'should age stop people meeting on a mental or an intellectual plane? If they share common interests—'

The son's head jerked up. Narrowly, consideringly he looked at her, his keen, trained eyes searching for - what? Those eyes moved to his father, but the professor was gazing at Maretta, his hand moving out, with just a trace of hesitation, to rest on hers. 'It's good to have you here, my dear,' he said.

She heard again the words her mother had used and they rang in her head like a raised voice in an empty concert hall. *He must be interested in you personally.* Had her mother been right, after all?

Maretta shared the breakfast table with Professor Tudor. Rhian, it seemed, had finished his meal and gone.

'This morning,' the professor said, 'I'll introduce you to my hide. There's a stream running through the estate which is an offshoot of one of the rivers of the Norfolk Broads. When I'm down there I'm often lucky enough to see the birds who frequent the waters and marshes of the Broads. You probably know,' he paused in the act of eating his breakfast, 'that East Anglia, and particularly this area of it, is the country's best region for bird-watching? The Fens and the Broads are particularly rich in bird life.'

Maretta, disguising with a vigorous nod the fact that she did not know these things, said she understood why her host so loved his home.

'That,' he agreed, 'and because it holds so many memories'. His tone sounded a little wistful, and momentarily he was lost in those memories he seemed to

hold so dear. But with a shake of the head he was back in the present. 'I'm lonely in my interest in ornithology. My son doesn't share it. My colleagues at the university are ignorant of the subject.' He buttered his toast. 'Which is why I value *your* interest, Maretta.' He smiled. 'To have such a fresh young mind to teach and train and to instil in it a love for ornithology which will, I hope, in time, be equal to mine - you simply can't know how I'll rejoice in your company this vacation.'

Maretta felt the responsibility of the task she had unwittingly undertaken weighing on her inordinately. She did not dare tell the professor that she had such a poor photographic memory she found it difficult to recognize human beings for the second time even after being introduced to them, let alone wild creatures of the bird world.

The hide, as they approached through the wooded area, was cleverly disguised with branches and leaves. A stream ran by a short distance away, and all around there was bird- song, joyous in the morning freshness. The sun overhead threw dappled leaf patterns on to the rippling water and Maretta's spirits rose to meet the beauty of it all.

The hide, barely large enough to admit two, was constructed of aluminium tubing and canvas. There was a flap which lifted to allow them in and a hole in the front for observation purposes.

'Sometimes,' Harford told her, 'I sit here for hours.'

'What do you do about meals?' Maretta asked.

He shrugged. 'When I remember, I bring sandwiches and a flask. I rarely allow anyone to come here while I'm watching, in case the subject of my observations is disturbed. However,' he smiled at her, his eyes bright, 'I now have a companion for my solitary hours - not that we shall be able to converse, except in whispers.'

Fear gripped her. Did the professor expect her to sit with him for all those long, silent hours? As if to confirm her fears, she saw that he had already remembered to provide her with a seat. Side by side were two folding, wooden chairs, one with a cushion, and which she guessed was for her. She

began to wish she had eaten a larger breakfast. How could she tell when her next meal would be?

But it seemed that their stay this time was not intended to be prolonged. 'I have two or three birds under observation,' the professor told her. 'There's a particularly noisy jay that interests me. The nestlings which hatched from the eggs are lingering unusually long in the nest. I'm also watching a tree-creeper which has come further inland than usual from the Broads. You've never heard of such a bird?' Maretta shook her head. 'It's not easy to find, because it's so well camouflaged, being brown like the bark of the tree it crawls up. It's white underneath and is the only small British land-bird with a curved beak. When I spot it, I'll show you.'

The morning passed and the professor made detailed notes. He had, it seemed, been challenged by the appearance of a bird he could not easily identify. On his notebook there appeared a sketch and around it were comments on its colour, size and song. Maretta wondered at his care, then remembered how meticulous he was in the course of his work at the university. The method went with the man. She wondered whether his son had inherited such painstaking attention to detail.

The professor took his binoculars from around his neck and gave them to Maretta to watch the movements of all the birds she could find. 'I won't confuse you today by telling you their names. Just get the general feeling of observation. Time enough for explanations another day. After all,' with his hand on her shoulder, 'I shall have you with me for some time, for as long, in fact, as your mother can spare you.'

Not, Maretta noticed, for as long as she would like to stay. He seemed to take it for granted that she would wish to remain there until the next academic session began in the autumn.

Rhian did not appear for lunch. He was working, his father said, on the report he was writing of his recent travels abroad. 'He has wanderlust in his blood. I doubt if he'll ever settle. Nothing will anchor him, not even a wife. If he were ever to marry, he would up and away before long.'

Maretta told herself she had imagined the prick of pain the professor's words aroused. 'He has a lady friend,' she ventured, 'a geologist, he said, like himself.'

'Doranne Forester? Yes, she likes him. She would like him, too, for a husband. But what would be the use of his marrying? He's too self-centred.'

'If,' she hazarded, and wondered at herself for pressing the point when the subject was no concern of hers, 'a woman loved him enough, couldn't she change him, make him more unselfish?'

He laughed. 'You have a strange idea of the power of a woman over a man, my dear. Which displays to me your sweet innocence.' Innocence? So the father could see what the son had admitted to having his doubts about.

'No,' Harford went on, 'he doesn't want a woman's love. He grew up motherless,' a strained pause, a checked sigh, 'he has passed the whole of his thirty-two years without a woman's gentle, loving care. I see no reason why he should not spend the rest of his life in that way. He'll never change. I know my son well enough to say that with confidence.'

What an incredibly biased picture he was painting of his son! Or was it not biased, but the truth? After all, Harford Tudor was a scientist. Was he looking at his son objectively, as Rhian had told her all scientists regarded all things, even their emotions? Even, also, those nearest and dearest to them? But was Rhian 'dear' to his father? And the father 'dear' to the son? There was no evidence to prove that this was so. From the beginning of her stay she had sensed a strange antagonism between the two men.

'I'm going out,' Harford told her. 'I've arranged to meet a group of fellow-ornithologists. One day, I'll take you with me to these meetings.'

'One day'? How long into the future did he see?

The sky had clouded over but the sun still shone at frequent intervals. Maretta wandered over the lawns, hearing in the distance a motor mower at work. In the rose garden a man tending the flowers raised a respectful hand. Two gardeners? But that, surely, would be the minimum necessary to

maintain this beautiful estate in good order. She walked on and found herself back in the woods where she had spent the morning. She crept past the professor's hide with a touch of awe, as though he were in there.

Down by the stream it was cool and peaceful. Birds swooped and landed, perching on boulders in the water or singing on branches of the trees. Would there ever come a time, she wondered, when she would be as proficient as the professor in identifying these attractive feathered creatures? Professor Tudor seemed to think so, and she told herself it would not do at this stage to allow doubts to creep into her own mind, let alone his; that with her bad visual memory she might never be able to remember and name any bird, other than the more common members of the species.

As she wandered back across the lawns, she saw Mrs. Fiske approaching with a tray. 'Your afternoon cup of tea, Miss Newell. Dr. Tudor's bringing chairs and a table. He said he spotted you from his attic wandering about and suggested I bring this out to you.'

So all the time she thought she had been free of him, she had been under Rhian Tudor's surveillance?

'It's very kind—' Maretta began, but Mrs. Fiske said it was no trouble at all.

'It's not often I can coax Dr. Tudor down from his attic. It's the other way round with his father - I can't get him into the house!'

Father and son, Maretta thought, both with their 'hides', one with a view as far as the horizon, the other shutting himself in amongst his feathered friends.

Now the son of the house was approaching, carrying folding chairs and a table. He greeted Maretta with a mocking smile and unfolded the table, allowing Mrs. Fiske to place the tray on it. Then she left them.

'If you're wondering,' Rhian said, opening a chair for Maretta and then one for himself, 'why I'm wishing myself on you, it's because I couldn't, out of common politeness, allow my father's guest to eat and drink alone.'

'There's no need,' she responded sharply, 'to put yourself out to entertain me.'

'Maybe,' he returned with a slight smile, 'I'm entertaining myself. When I returned here to relax and write my report, I hardly expected my father to arrive home for his long vacation accompanied by a wide-eyed, beautiful young . woman. He warned me in advance that he was bringing a friend. Knowing the type of person he usually associates with, imagine my astonishment when you turned up on the doorstep!'

Maretta remembered his expression when he first saw her. There had been not only astonishment in his eyes, but horror, too. She wished she could tackle him about that, but could not think of any way of doing so without arousing his annoyance. Because for some reason she felt that he would be annoyed .. .-

He invited her to pour the tea. There were fruit scones and home-made apricot jam. There were chocolate biscuits, too. With little ceremony, Rhian invited Maretta to help herself and proceeded to cover a scone generously with butter. He crossed his legs which, in the denim jeans he was wearing, looked long and muscular. His check shirt was short-sleeved and partially unbuttoned.

Partly to break the awkward silence and partly out of a continuing curiosity, Maretta remarked, 'You've recently returned from a journey abroad, I understand?'

He nodded as if it were of little consequence. 'Just one of my many journeys across the world.'

'Your father said you enjoy them. Are they part of that freedom you like so much?'

He saw her too-sweet smile and responded cuttingly, 'You aren't by any chance taunting me - in, if I may say so, a .very unsubtle way - for not having married?'

She was silent.

He went on, 'Tell me, what kind of freedom is there for a man in tying himself down to a woman and children?'

'I've never met,' she cried, goaded now, 'a man so selfish and callous. They would be your children, too, wouldn't they? Anyway, it's what most men want, isn't it - a wife and family?'

'Maybe I'm not like most men. Maybe I so enjoy being able to up and go whenever and wherever I want that the very thought of having to forfeit it for the sake of taking to myself a loving wife with clinging arms and possessive ways is abhorrent to me.'

Did he mean what he said? Was he being sincere or merely intending to provoke her? He was frowning at a pebble he had taken from his pocket and it so absorbed him she was able to study his face. But she might have been gazing at a page written in a foreign language for all the information she gleaned from her examination.

His words had sickened her, but what right, she asked herself, had she to sit in judgment on this man, who was after all simply the son of her host, and therefore meant nothing to her?

He glanced at her, then returned his gaze to the pebble and she said, 'I suppose that in your opinion a woman has nothing to lose and everything to gain from marriage?'

'In my opinion, yes. You, for instance. You wouldn't lose your freedom, you would gain it. After all, you need never work again. You could let your qualifications remain as scant as they are, you could let your brain rust away, lowering your mental age, like most women, so that it coincides with your small children—'

'If I marry,' she broke in, 'and as I've already told you, I've found no man as yet who has made me want to, I won't sit back and spend the rest of my life pandering to his needs. If the man I married were poor, I'd go out to work. If he were not, I would go to classes, pass all the exams I'd need to pass to get those qualifications I had to forfeit when my father died.'

He looked at her again, this time through narrow, appraising eyes. 'Tell me something. Why did you come here?'

She looked at him, puzzled. 'Because your father invited me. Why are you frowning? Don't you believe me?'

'I believe you, but why did he invite you?'

She thought for a moment. 'I honestly don't know. He's come into the lab a number of times when I've been there. He's spoken to me often. He's always been friendly, considering I'm only a lab assistant. But then he's friendly to everyone. It might be—' She hesitated. Would he laugh at her? 'It might be because one day I watched a bird through the lab windows and said I wondered what it was. Your father was in the room and told me. After that, he seemed to take a greater interest in me. Perhaps,' she smiled brightly, 'he saw in me a potential fellow-ornithologist.'

He raised a doubting, quizzical eyebrow and said, almost to himself, 'He had to have a reason.'

'I don't know what you mean.' She hoped he would recognize her irritation, but he smiled.

'I don't suppose you do. And I don't propose to explain.'

Wanting something to do to calm her flustered nerves, Maretta gathered the crockery together, placing it on the tray. He did not take the hint and return to his work. She wished he would go. The man was disturbing her, making her restless. Mrs. Fiske came across the lawn, smiled at them both and went off with the tray. Rhian turned the pebble round and round, now and then idly rubbing it on the leg of his trousers as if trying to improve the shine. It was plain that his thoughts were not on the object in his hand.

Maretta asked, wanting to break the strained silence, 'Where do you go on your journeys abroad?'

Rhian roused himself from his reverie. 'All over the place. I go to jungles and to deserts. I've been through swamps. I've clambered over rocks. I've

experienced sand and dust storms. I've been on oil rigs in gales and above roaring seas. I've spent some time in the United States and Canada, and South America, too.'

She tried to visualize him in such differing conditions and her heart beat strangely fast to think of the dangers he had faced and overcome. She wondered again at his many personalities - the remote, detached, rather sardonic side to him; the touch of the academic about him which he seemed to dislike so much; the tough build of his body, which echoed the rough, tough life he seemed at times to have led; the dauntingly self-sufficient manner. Would there ever be any woman who could get under the skin of that self-sufficiency deeply enough to inject into him a need for her so great that he would never feel complete without her again?

The answer, she knew, was no, and the thought fretted her so much she wanted to run away from it. But it was he who moved. He rose, apologizing for having to leave her and thanking her for her company.

She watched him walk away, his thumbs hooked into the leather belt around his waist. As he disappeared into the house, the sun passed behind a cloud and the whole world seemed momentarily to grow darker.

CHAPTER THREE

PROFESSOR TUDOR returned in time for dinner. Maretta had changed and was standing at the window of the drawing-room wondering what to do. The door opened and her heart lurched, thinking it was Rhian, but it was his father.

In his hand he held a parcel. He walked across to the window where Maretta was standing and, without a word of explanation, offered it to her.

Maretta drew back a little, staring at it. 'For - for me?' she asked.

Harford smiled as if he were receiving instead of making a gift. 'Open it,' he urged, pressing the box into her hands. He produced a penknife so that she could cut the string and took the paper from her when she had removed it. The box opened and she gasped.

'Binoculars! But - but why?'

'No ornithologist can function efficiently without binoculars, Maretta.'

'But I'm—' What could she say? I'm not an ornithologist, I'm interested in bird life in a very amateur way, so I don't merit these? No, she couldn't say that. She drew a long breath as she extracted the binoculars from their container. 'It was - it was wonderful of you. But really I—'

'You must accept them, Maretta,' Harford said firmly. 'If we're to go observing together, we can share the hide, but it's impossible to share binoculars.'

He was taking her passing interest so seriously! It was almost as if she were being pushed into his hobby like someone venturing on to grassland only to find it was a bog and sucking her in.

'You must read the instructions, then I shall demonstrate how to use them. It may seem complicated at first, but once you know how to focus them quickly on the object you're studying, it all falls into place. Now,' he glanced at the clock on the mantelshelf, 'I must wash and change for dinner. I hurried

straight in to find you.' He looked at the present he had given her and seemed as excited as a young boy. 'You're pleased with them?'

It was absolutely necessary, she knew, to hide her uncertainty and self-doubt. 'They're wonderful, Professor Tudor. I'm delighted. It was such a surprise.'

He seemed pleased by her apparent pleasure. The door opened, but Maretta steeled herself not to look round. 'You must call me Harford, Maretta. We're friends, are we not? We can't have formality between friends.'

The professor nodded to his son, murmured that he would rejoin them soon and closed the door behind him. There was a long silence. Maretta studied the binoculars, fingering them delicately, not really knowing what to do with them. At last she raised her head. Rhian had dressed more informally this evening, his rust-coloured jacket, with its pockets and metal buttons, matching the well-fitting pants. His shirt was open-necked and dark red.

It was the rate of her heartbeats at the sight of him that frightened Maretta. Every nerve in her body vibrated as his steel-grey eyes held hers.

'So it's first names now?' His eyes moved over her assessingly, but his expression gave no indication as to whether or not he was impressed by the figure-fitting flame stretch top she had teamed with a long, swirling black skirt.

'Yes,' she responded, 'it's first names. You must have heard what your father said. I'm sure,' a little tartly, 'there's very little you miss.'

He strolled across the room and at his approach, her breathing became shorter and shallower. 'Nor, it seems,' he murmured, 'do you miss a trick, either.'

Lips tight, eyes bright with anger, she responded, 'I don't know what that's supposed to mean.'

'No?' He indicated the binoculars. 'Those are yours, not my father's?'

'Do you think I *asked* your father to buy me these?'

'Nothing so straightforward and honest,' he drawled. 'A woman has a way of getting a thing she wants without actually asking.'

'Well, you're wrong!' The man was obnoxious. No wonder he and his father did not get on well. Who could live in harmony with a man like this? 'You're insinuating and smearing, Dr. Tudor, and I object,' she raged. 'You're drawing conclusions even when there's no trace of any data on which to base such conclusions!'

'You're talking like a scientist,' he murmured, helping himself to a drink. 'Data, conclusions. Who taught you - my father?'

'Your father and I are not as well acquainted as you seem to think. I work among scientists, remember.'

'Ah, yes, and have one as a boy-friend.'

'Friend,' she corrected. He lifted a sceptical eyebrow. 'Yes,' she affirmed, 'friend. Isn't it essential, Dr. Tudor, for scientists to get their facts right, to base their work on truths, not on assumptions?'

'Not always,' he replied easily. 'A scientist often has to assume a great deal before he can put a theory to the test and discover a scientific truth. And,' he drank from his glass, 'I thought it was first names - Maretta?'

Her name on his lips! There was a swift, elusive movement inside her like the flight of a frightened bird. He made her name sound so strange, so significant - so sweet.

'You're accepting those binoculars from my father?' he asked casually, lifting his glass and studying its colour against the light.

She bridled. 'Why not? He gave them to me as a piece of equipment, not as a gift.'

'Piece of equipment,' he mused, lounging against the sideboard, 'we're back to the lab again. An expensive piece of equipment, Marettta.'

Her heart jerked as she remembered - first names. Could She ever bring herself to call him by his?

'Are you aware of just how much they cost?'

'I'll leave them behind when I go,' she said defensively.

'And hurt my father's feelings?' .. 'He gave them to me for the sole purpose of bird-watching from his hide. He said we couldn't share binoculars, so he bought me these. When I leave here I won't need—'

'But you will, you know. Since he's spent time and money on training you to share his enthusiasm for studying the habits and habitats of his precious feathered friends, when you go home he'll expect you to keep up your interest in the subject and no doubt return here at regular intervals to share his hide and his hobby, if,' he added as if the idea amused him, 'nothing else.'

She let the provocative comment pass, because it so dismayed her to think that a passing remark about a blackbird outside the university laboratory only a few weeks before had placed her under so enormous an obligation to such a man as Professor Tudor for such a long time to come.

Harford took Marettta to the hide again next day. He taught her how to use the binoculars he had given her - specially chosen for bird-watching, he said - adjusting them by a slight movement of the fingertips. He showed her the telescope and tripod he had bought for watching the wading birds on the mud-banks at the coast.

'No good to you as a beginner,' he told her, 'because as such, you need to be able to focus quickly on birds which are fairly close. Otherwise I would let you use it.' He touched the telescope with reverence. 'It cost a great deal of money.'

Money - a commodity, Maretta mused, of which neither of the Tudors seemed to be short.

'But silence,' Harford was saying, 'is the best equipment of all, plus patience - and more patience.' After a moment, he said, 'Listen to that scolding bird. It's a redshank and that's its alarm call. In the breeding season in the spring, it makes a yodelling sound. Normally, it has a flute-like call, but it's restless and easily disturbed. See,' he trained his binoculars on it through the flap in the hide, 'there it is. Grey-brown but lighter below and flecked with greyish brown. Do you think you'll recognize it yourself next time?'

Maretta, trying to distinguish the bird from all the others that flew around them and to and fro across the stream, thought desperately, I can't even find it now, let alone recognize it later.

'I - well, I -'

The professor was not fooled. He was too experienced in the art of bird watching to be misled into believing that she had succeeded in finding the redshank to which he was referring. He stood close beside her and put his arm up so that he could move the binoculars she was holding into the correct position for her to find the bird. He was, of necessity, pressed against her shoulder and she did not feel the need to flinch away as she did from contact with his son.

He's comforting, she thought, and understanding, and such a - such a *nice* man. No other adjective seemed to fit him better. 'There,' he said, 'now do you see it?'

At last she caught a glimpse of the redshank and said excitedly, 'Yes, yes, I see it now.' His arm rested across her shoulders as she glanced up at him, her eyes alight with achievement. She had identified her first bird.

Harford looked down at her and his excitement matched hers, his eyes as bright, his mouth, although partly hidden by his tapering beard, curved into a smile. There was about his expression something that was not at all paternal and as she looked away, a quick frown creased her forehead. He was

pleased, she told herself comfortably, as pleased as she was that she had identified the redshank.

So the morning passed, but the redshank was Maretta's only success. She was unable, after that, to identify positively any other bird the professor pointed out. Either she was not looking in the right direction, or they had flown away before she had trained her binoculars on to them.

He pacified her, reminding her she was only a beginner. It would come, he promised, in a rush, probably. One day it would all be there, the ability to spot, identify and recognize the song and the plumage. But Maretta, knowing herself better than the professor, was doubtful. '

'If I could read some books—' she said, her voice trailing away doubtfully.

'Books?' He seemed delighted by her interest. 'I have many on the subject. I'll pick out the simplest first, and then progress to the more complicated aspects of ornithology. Maretta,' he turned towards her, 'I'm so pleased at the way you're beginning already to share my enthusiasm.'

Enthusiasm? she thought unhappily. It was no such thing. It was desperation.

So Rhian caught her that afternoon, sitting in the drawing-room surrounded by books on ornithology. The professor had returned to his hide. He would not tire her, he had said, by taking her there again that day. 'You'll get confused and bewildered if you attempt too much too soon.'

Confused? Bewildered? She was that already. On the cover of one of the books there was a picture of an owl. It was a dauntingly learned-looking owl, with enormous, slightly reproachful eyes. I bet, she thought, I couldn't even recognize an owl if I saw one. After all, they came out at night - that much she knew - and all you could see was the eyes, and how could anyone, even Professor Tudor, expect you to recognize a bird only by its eyes?

Rhian strolled in for afternoon tea. So Mrs. Fiske had managed to persuade him to leave his attic once again. She had obviously not been so successful with the father. His afternoon cup of tea was taken down to the hide.

Rhian laughed when he saw the books around her, but it was more with irony than amusement. He dropped into a chair. There was no room on the settee because, except for the space that Maretta herself was occupying, it was covered in books.

'So which of the two Tudors are you trying to impress - my father with your enthusiasm and dedication, or me, with your willingness to learn and therefore your suitability to be considered a friend, if not a member, of the family?'

She looked at him. 'Hardly a member of the family.' The lift of his eyebrow was faintly derisory and brought an angry sting to her cheeks. 'And I'm not trying to impress anybody, certainly not you. If I were, I'd be studying books on geology, wouldn't I?'

He sat forward. 'You tempt me to bring an armful down from my bookshelves, push them under your nose and after a certain lapse of time, question you on your newly-acquired knowledge.'

Geology. She kept her eyes down, because she did not want to betray the stirring of excitement the subject aroused. That would be something she felt she could, as an amateur, cope with. It stirred her imagination, aroused her curiosity. It would require no lightning, on-the-spot recognition as ornithology did. There would be a piece of rock lying there, still and touchable, not elusive and out of reach like a swiftly-flying bird. There would be all the time in the world to handle the rock, identify it, date it, look for hidden fossils.

'Would you like it if I did?'

'Did what?' she responded casually. 'Give me some books to read on geology?' She managed a careless shrug. 'I'm reading these books and learning about bird life to please your father.'

'Meaning you have no desire to please me?'

'Is there any reason why I should?' Her eyes dwelt on the picture of an eagle, but her senses picked up the sharp movement, the swift tensing of muscles

and curbed anger of the man to whom she was talking. She was reminded of the strength which so plainly lay dormant under the apparent indolence of that long, tough body, of the tensions which lurked beneath the strange relationship between father and son.

'For sheer grandeur and majestic bearing,' Maretta read, 'there is nothing in the bird world to compare with the golden eagle. This great bird of prey, with its giant wing span, hurls through the air towards its victim at a breathtaking, almost unbelievable speed, snaring it and bringing it to ground, making its kill.'

Maretta shivered involuntarily as Rhian moved. He leaned back in his seat, seemingly relaxed, like a satisfied, conquering bird of prey.

It was during dinner that Harford announced his intention of inviting his bird-watching friends to the house. There would be a meeting, followed by coffee and socializing-

'There should be about fifteen of us,' he said. He glanced at Maretta. 'I should be delighted, my dear, if you would consent to act as hostess.'

Hostess? Her appetite, although the meal had hardly begun, was blunted. She put down her knife and fork and seized her glass of water. Its cool tastelessness did nothing to calm her state of mind. Act as hostess - as an *equal* - to this man who, no matter how long she might spend in his home and be drawn into his domestic surroundings, would always remain for her on a high, unreachable pedestal? Welcome his guests as though she belonged there, she, Maretta Newell, *a little lab assistant*, as his son had so derisively dismissed her?

'But, Professor - I mean, Harford,' the name still sounded strange, impermissible, 'I'm hardly suited to - to receive your guests.'

Rhian, leaning back and fingering his wine glass, said, with a cynical smile, 'Are you questioning my learned father's judgment, Maretta? Are you saying in a roundabout way that you have no faith in his ability to assess someone's potential? *My father*, who is the head of a university faculty, who's a brain amongst brains, who's so clever he can sense that deep within even so

humble a creature as a young woman laboratory assistant there's intellectual ability and learning powers as yet undiscovered?'

He glanced obliquely at his father, as if trying to judge the effect of his provocation.

As Maretta looked from father to son, saw the dark beard and narrow face of the older man and the hard, intense eyes of the younger, the centuries fell away and it was as if these two men were engaged in a bitter and irreconcilable family feud which could only end in duel and death - but which of them would survive and which would succumb to the other's sword she could not foresee. A chill ran through her beneath the surface of her skin. Who - or what - was the object of their dissension?

The professor's cheeks had reddened and it was not from the effects of the wine he had drunk. He deflected his son's barbs by ignoring them. Whether or not he bled a little inwardly he did not reveal.

'My dear Maretta,' his hand came to rest on her arm, 'it hurts me to hear you demean yourself. I would feel honoured, and I say that with all sincerity, if you would stand by my side and, with me, receive my guests.'

Honoured? The professor's kindliness, his generosity of spirit astonished her. 'The - the other way round, surely,' she stammered, but his raised hand silenced her.

'My word,' came the son's sarcastic voice, 'you really must rate yourself low.'

Implying, Maretta thought, seeing the biting look in his eyes, that she must think herself low indeed if she placed herself lower than his father. The implication was not lost on Harford Tudor.

'If you think so badly of me, Rhian, if you place me so far down on your scale of values, remember that you're my son and must therefore have inherited some, if not all, of my bad characteristics.'

Harford's response, although so quietly spoken, held a thrust. Why, Maretta wondered, looking wildly from father to son, did these two men hate each other so? And why were they using her as a weapon?

'It would be wonderful, Harford,' she said in a firm, defiant voice, 'to act as your hostess. I'm honoured that you should ask me.'

The son's eyes held a quick, savage contempt. She had placed herself on the side of the enemy.

After dinner, Rhian went out. As Maretta sat in the drawing-room with Harford, she heard the car rev and roar away. Maretta suffered an unexpected wave of tiredness which dulled her brain and her responses. It was as if curtains had been prematurely drawn across a window, shutting out the daylight. Harford answered the question she had not liked to ask.

'He's almost certainly gone to meet his lady friend. They usually get together at some prearranged rendezvous. She used to live in this area,' he explained, 'until she found a teaching job in the next county. She's his latest in a long line.' Harford spoke contemptuously of his son's inconstancy.

'He was telling me,' Maretta said, feeling strangely that talking about the man brought him back into the house, 'how far away his work takes him.'

'He's restless by nature, so it's as well that his work supplies the change of scenery he seems to need, which,' with the same contempt, 'goes with his perpetual need for a change of female companion.' He glanced at his watch. 'I doubt if he'll return until the early hours. Maybe not until the morning.'

Maretta's pulse rate underwent a disturbing, momentary change of rhythm. But she reproached herself for being ruffled by the thought of Rhian Tudor remaining all night with his girl-friend. From the way he had spoken so carelessly of his casual relationships with the opposite sex while working abroad, it was part of his life-pattern to find a woman - any woman - who was willing to help him fulfil his 'biological need', as he so derisively called it.

'I'm off to my hide, Maretta,' Harford said. 'Will you come with me to watch the birds' behaviour as evening approaches?'

So they kept watch together in the woods by the stream. Maretta had difficulty in keeping her attention from wandering and her thoughts from wondering where Rhian was now. The picture she conjured up of him in his girl-friend's arms was peculiarly abhorrent. She began to fidget, which made Harford tell her to feel free to leave the hide and walk in the grounds if she liked, as long as she did not frighten the birds away.

The scent of the evening was heavy outside the hide. The chill of it made her shiver in her thin dress, so she made for the house. On her way upstairs, she listened to the tread of her footsteps overridden by the beat of her heart. An idea had crept into her mind. Rhian Tudor was out. His study was unoccupied. Why should she not climb up there and look at the view?

The door creaked as she opened it. Fearfully, as if expecting to find a ghost in possession, she looked around. The room, although empty, was filled by her imagination with the presence of the man to whom it belonged.

The air was full of him, of his cool, self-assured personality, of his toughness, of his magnetism and masculinity. It told of his learnedness, too, in the shelves filled with technical books, in the notes he had made and which were scattered about all over the desk and the bench which had been built along one side of the room, ending at the window.

The view was as tranquil and green as it had been the last time she had gazed at it. Maretta shifted the binoculars until they hung from her shoulder a little more securely, then she leant with her elbows on the sill and searched for the line of the sea. But as the evening had deepened into darkness, the horizon had crept closer and the sea had slipped behind it.

Below and in the near distance were the woods by the stream and somewhere amongst those trees the professor was observing the bird life. In the eaves above the open window, birds were twittering at the approach of dusk. There was an urgency in their call and the sound tugged at a thread of disquietude within her. Rhian might return and find her there. Shouldn't she go now, just in case he came back sooner than his father had anticipated?

But the view held her captive and she watched as the horizon moved almost perceptibly nearer. The room behind her darkened, but the fields and the tops of the gently swaying trees glowed in the lingering traces of daylight.

There were steps on the stairs, firm and unmistakable, masculine and meaningful, making without doubt for the attic room. There was no other room up there. Petrified, Maretta held her breath. Was it Harford come to find her? Surely it couldn't be his son! She whirled round as the door came open and the light came on. The binoculars, which she had carried hanging from her shoulder, swung high in the air, hitting against the photo-microscope on the bench.

As the instrument jarred under the impact, a slide was knocked out of position to the floor, splintering on impact. There was a sickening bang and Maretta, hardly able to breathe, jerked her head round to see that the camera which had been fixed to the top of the instrument had fallen to the bench. The binoculars, in their violent movement, must have unfastened the locking device, loosened the camera from its hold and allowed it to topple and crash on to the top of the bench.

She could hardly bring herself to meet the eyes - or the anger - of the owner of the room, but it was impossible to make an apology without looking at the person for whom it was intended. In those eyes she met a burning fury which, as they first surveyed her, then the binoculars, then the damage they had done, cooled rapidly to a temperature which seared like frostbite.

He let out an expletive which made her wince, strode across the room to the bench on which the photo-microscope stood and picked up the camera. As he turned it over in his hands, inspected it and held it up to his eye, Maretta could not move. Her mouth was parched, her hands cemented together in a despairing grip, her breathing weak.

'Yes,' he said at last, 'it's damaged. It will have to be repaired. Luckily for you,' he faced her, and she flinched under the lash of his tone, 'there's a shop in the town which will be able to supply the part. It will, however, put me back in my work by some days.'

'The - the slide,' Marett said, her voice a whisper, 'it's broken.' She crouched down to pick up the splintered pieces, but he snapped, 'Leave it!' as if she were a disobedient dog. 'You'll only cut yourself, then I'd have my father's wrath to reckon with. I'd hate to be accused of being the cause of injuring his precious little lab assistant.'

She rose, pushing back her hair with both hands, revealing scarlet cheeks and frightened eyes. 'I'm - I'm sorry. I didn't do it deliberately. I'm usually very careful with equipment - I handle it so much at work. It - it was an accident, completely unforeseen—'

'Most accidents are,' he returned harshly. 'But you should have known better than the average female, shouldn't you?'

She resented his contemptuous tone and her voice rose with her colour. 'I didn't touch the thing at all. It was the binoculars—'

'It was guilt at spying on the work I'm doing,' he accused, 'at being here without permission. I saw that for myself in the way you turned so quickly when I came in.'

'I admit,' she said, 'that I should have asked you first, but how could I when you were out? But I certainly wasn't *spying*. How could you accuse me of such a thing?'

'Because it goes on. Industrial spying, it's called. How do I know that under that sweetly innocent manner you adopt you aren't involved in industrial espionage? I work for a company that likes to keep the information collected by its employees to itself.'

'I'm sorry,' she said flustered, 'that you think so little of my integrity you believe I'm capable of giving your secrets away. Not that I'd recognize any of those secrets even if I saw them. I'm sorry, too, about the damage. I'll pay for it.' She drew a slow, uneven breath. 'When you know how much the repairs are going to cost, let me know and I'll write you out a cheque.'

He looked at her for a long moment. 'If you knew the cost of this very expensive piece of equipment - it belongs to my company, not to me - I

doubt if you would have made that offer. Even a small repair could cancel out one or two of your monthly pay cheques. I happen to know how much laboratory assistants are paid.'

Her chin came up. 'However much it costs, the offer still holds. And I'm sorry for coming up here uninvited. Your father told me you'd be gone for a long time. He told me you were almost certainly meeting your girl-friend, so you might not even be back until morning.'

'Well, he told you wrong. I went to the local pub for a drink.' She noticed then how casually he was dressed. His blue anorak was open and there was a dark red shirt beneath. There were pockets in it and a belt round his waist. The shirt was partly unbuttoned and open at the neck, revealing the long, strong column of his throat.

In his well-worn denim pants, he looked completely masculine and so unlike the suave, meticulously dressed man he had been when she had first met him that he could have been his own twin brother. It was plain that he had two distinct personalities. One was the highly-paid executive, cultured, educated and accomplished. The other was the tough geologist, an expert in his own line, accustomed to giving orders and assuming command in rough, even arduous conditions, living a hard, demanding life and taking his leisure and his pleasure where he could find it.

'If I had stayed out all night,' his fingers slipped under his belt, his eyes stayed on her, 'would it have worried you?'

The question puzzled her. 'Worried me? Why should it?'

'Wouldn't you have been shocked by such outrageous behaviour by the son of your *friend*?'

'Shocked? No. Not even surprised. It's what I would have expected of you.'

'On what grounds do you base such an assumption?'

She shrugged slightly. 'On what you've told me about yourself. On my - my knowledge of you.'

'You know me so well. You've known me so long.'

The sarcasm irritated, but she shrugged. 'Long enough to exercise my judgment, to take a few inspired guesses regarding your views about women.'

He removed his jacket, throwing it into a corner, and rested against the desk, hands in trouser pockets, legs wrapped one over the other. 'You've guessed, for instance, that I look upon them as of secondary importance in my life, as decorative when I require - as a man often does - something stimulating and exciting to look at?' There was a sardonic gleam in his eyes. 'That I use them, maybe at times abuse them, then when they object to my rough treatment, chuck them aside and find another to take their place?'

His words both sickened and aroused her, stirring within her sensations and desires which repelled yet at the same time delighted. The man was getting under her skin like an injection, passing into her body and circulating in her veins. Momentarily, she closed her eyes. Somehow she had to shut out his attractions. She heard him laugh and agitatedly, angrily, she turned away to stare out of the window.

'All I wanted to do,' she said, and her voice sounded strange, 'was to look at the view. That's the only reason I came.'

Behind her the light went out and he came to stand beside her. It was no accident, she was certain, that his arm touched hers, but even as she tried to draw back, he moved again so that their bodies were in contact. She bit her lip and wanted to cry, Stop it! Stop tormenting me. I'm not your kind of woman. Can't you see that?

'See,' he murmured, gesturing, 'the view has gone. The curtain has come down and taken it away. Not even the horizon to look at, so that you can go on wondering what lies beyond it.' His voice low, he went on, 'My sense of freedom's gone, too.' There was a long tense pause and she felt him press even closer. 'Never mind,' he said with a smile in his voice, 'when daylight returns, my freedom will come back with it. Like,' he looked down at her and she glanced up at him, seeing with a shock how near his face was to hers,

'like succumbing to a woman's charms through the darkness of the night, then getting up and walking away from her next morning.'

'Back to your freedom,' she said bitterly, moving away and groping in the darkness for the door. He did not follow her.

'Back to my freedom,' he echoed, with a mocking, taunting smile.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN Maretta breakfasted next morning, she found that Harford's place was empty and that his dishes had been used. She hurried through her breakfast, hoping to miss Rhian, but he strolled in before she had finished.

Her cup was still in front of her, the coffee still too hot to drink. He gave an ironic smile, looked her over swiftly, taking in her open-necked top and tight denim pants, and dropped into his chair, having apparently dismissed her completely from his mind. She was as unworthy of further contemplation, his expression told her, as a piece of rock too young in a geologist's time scale to be of interest.

He was dressed casually again and his manner matched his style of dressing. He did not attempt to make conversation. As far as he was concerned, she was of less importance than a leg of the table at which she sat. Mrs. Fiske came in, her footsteps quick and purposeful. With a cloth to protect her hand, she held a plate of bacon and eggs which she placed in front of Rhian. The smile he threw at her contained enough charm, Maretta reflected, to draw the wallpaper from the wall.

When Mrs. Fiske had left, the smile was turned in Maretta's direction. The charm had changed to mockery, but still he did not speak. Was he testing her, trying to discover how long she could stand the silence? He removed the newspaper from his father's chair and folded it so as to read part of the front page. He appeared lost to the world. It was Maretta who had lost the battle.

She pushed back her chair, steeled herself to endure the smile of victory which sure enough came her way, but all the same she coloured. With her head high she walked to the door and closed it behind her, lingering in the hall. The great, spacious area never failed to impress her, with its high ceiling and panelled walls, the stag's head over the entrance door and the coat of arms repeated in plaster in the ceiling. The words were in Latin and she wondered with idle curiosity what they meant.

Harford emerged from his study and walked towards her, resting his hand on her shoulder. The dining-room door opened and Rhian came out. The professor's hand remained firmly where it was. Rhian strolled across to the

long low oaken table below the window and picked up a magazine. Maretta glanced his way furtively and saw on the glossy cover the picture of a bird with sweeping outspread wings. It was one of Harford's ornithological magazines. Why was Rhian reading it?

'This evening, Maretta,' Professor Tudor said, 'I'm going to a large barn which stands across the park on the other side of the estate. A barn owl inhabits the place, I've been hoping for some time to get a picture of him. Would you like to come with me and perhaps get a look at him?'

'A picture,' Maretta queried, 'in the dark?'

'Electronic flash,' murmured Rhian, answering for his father.

'Yes, please,' said Maretta, ignoring the son. 'I'd love to come with you.'

The hand on her shoulder tightened with pleasure. 'Good.' Now the hand patted her. 'After dinner, we will go together, you and I.'

The professor's eyes caught and held hers and there was a strange light in them. She had a curious feeling that he was looking at her, yet not seeing her, as if he were gazing through her. As if she were a ghost...

Yet when she smiled back, tremulously, his smile in response was warm and tinged with something akin to excitement. 'It will be so good,' he said, 'to have company. One wearies sometimes for companionship.'

Maretta felt Rhian's eyes on them as Harford returned to his study, closing the door. She shook away the odd sense of guilt which had settled like a fluttering bird on her person and made for the staircase, passing Rhian on the way. He dropped the magazine to the table and with an outstretched hand held her back. She objected to the touch of him so violently she twisted, but the fingers, which had been resting lightly on her flesh, now dug into it relentlessly. It was the hold of an angry man.

'What do you want?' she snapped, flinching from the pain but steeling herself not to show it.

'Having made a date with my father—'

'Don't be stupid!' Her colour flared. 'It was nothing more than an agreement to go with him when he takes his pictures. How can you read anything into that?'

'In a barn, in the pitch darkness?'

'Your mind is little better than a sewer! Don't judge others - especially your father - by your own abysmally low standards.'

'Thanks. Your opinion of my moral code is a delight to hear. And my father, for all his clean living, is human. He's a man, he's only just over fifty, which these days is certainly not old. He's fit, he's active, he's perfectly capable of bedding a woman if he so desired.'

Her cheeks burned. Her hand came up in a weak imitation of a karate chop and she hit at the wrist of the hand which still gripped her, but it was as effective as using her fist to knock over a concrete column. The action hurt her more than it hurt the man she was hitting. And still the fingers dug, if anything more viciously.

Tears started to her eyes. 'Please let me go. You're hurting me.'

She might have been talking to a mountain of granite for all the effect her plea had on him. 'As I was saying,' he continued, 'since you've made a date with my father for this evening, I'm issuing an invitation for this afternoon.'

'No, thank you,' she broke in, 'I—'

'I'm going into Norwich. I'm taking that camera you broke to a retailer who I think will have the necessary spare part in stock. Will you come?'

'The camera you broke.' He had cleverly reminded her of that unguarded moment when she had damaged a vital piece of equipment after walking uninvited in to his study.

The stab of guilt she experienced, in addition to the pain she was suffering under the unrelenting pressure of his fingers, forced agreement from her. The pressure eased, but she had once again to endure the gleam of victory which flashed in and out of his eyes. She thought, I'd rather have the pain... and fled up the stairs.

Maretta turned from the dressing-table mirror and looked at her watch. Her hair was combed, her make-up light, her hands were washed. Somewhere in the house the telephone rang. Someone answered it, because the ringing stopped.

It was so near to lunchtime Maretta thought she might as well go down. She ran the comb once more through her hair, opened the door and walked along the landing to the top of the stairs. The phone call must have been for Rhian, because he was talking and laughing in the hall.

Maretta lingered uncertainly on the landing, hearing him say, 'Can't oblige, Doranne. I shall be otherwise engaged. Another female? Sweetie, it's time you learned some of the facts of my life. I have a woman on call in almost every part of the world. Wherever I happen to be prospecting, I have only to pick up the phone... Boasting? No, telling you the simple truth.'

Maretta made a small, involuntary movement. He must have heard because his head came up. He saw her and his eyes wore a wary, irritated look. She swung round and retreated to her bedroom.

She sat on the bed and waited. It was not until she became conscious of the pain that she realized how tightly her hands were gripping each other. She prised them apart, got up and walked about the room. When the dinner gong sounded, she knew she could not delay any longer.

Rhian was still on the phone. She walked down the stairs, her head high, her eyes averted from the lounging figure who was smiling at some remark the woman at the other end of the line had made. As Maretta drew level with him, he clicked his fingers and her head turned towards him. It was a reflex action over which she had had no control. He grinned broadly, satisfied that he had succeeded in making her forget her resolve to ignore him. It was plain that only half his mind was on the chattering voice of the speaker. The other

half was assessing in an indolent fashion the quality and promise of the curving, feminine outline of the girl who was opening the dining-room door.

Professor Tudor first heard of the intended outing when lunch was nearly over. He did not seem pleased. Maretta was puzzled by his slightly belligerent questioning of his son. 'But why are you taking her?'

'Why not?'

The professor was nettled. He sought for a satisfactory reply, his eyes wandering round the room as if the furniture would provide it for him. He settled on the windows. 'I shall be in my hide, but Maretta will be perfectly happy reading the books on ornithology I've lent her. If her interest in the subject is to deepen and remain, as I have every hope that it will, she has a great deal of work in front of her.'

He's speaking, Maretta thought, as if I were a student. Her mind screeched like a bird giving a warning of danger. What if she failed to rise to his high expectations of her?

'She's already agreed,' Rhian said carelessly, pushing back his chair. 'Come on, Maretta.'

She glanced at the professor. He was about to speak and, it seemed, to object. 'Do you mind, Harford,' she asked, 'if I—?' Her gesture of consulting him had its effect.

'Go, go, Maretta.' Harford rose. 'See something of Norwich. Heaven knows, there are few enough shops in the village for anybody's taste, let alone a young woman's.'

She looked down at herself, then up at Rhian. 'I'll have to get ready.'

He inspected her. 'What's unready about you? As far as I can see, you're perfectly - ready.' The direction of his glance could not be mistaken. 'Everything there, in the right place, in the right proportions.'

He looked fleetingly, tauntingly at his father, then left the room. Maretta ran after him, overtook him in the hall and raced up the stairs. All the way to the top he watched her. She knew, because when she glanced down he was still there, head uplifted, eyes sardonic - and thoughtful.

They parked the car in the city and found it was market day. 'Which would you rather do - go sightseeing or shopping? First there's the cathedral,' he counted on his fingers, 'dates from Norman days, fifteenth-century spire, the second tallest in England. Near the cathedral Edith Cavell is buried. There's a fourteenth-century grammar school where Lord Nelson was once a pupil. Near the market-place there's the fifteenth-century Guildhall. Not forgetting Norwich Castle, which was again built by the Normans. The Castle Keep is a museum now. Also there's Strangers' Hall, said to be named after the Flemish "strangers" who came here to settle and weave in the sixteenth century. It has rooms furnished in different periods.

'But whatever you choose to do,' he indicated the box in his hands, 'you will have to do alone. The shop I'm taking this camera to is in one of the side streets. I don't know how long I shall be.'

Maretta would have loved to have wandered round Norwich - but not alone. If Rhian had been prepared to go with her, she would not have felt so lost. She looked around. 'I think I'll forgo the sightseeing this journey. It's not much fun on your own.'

'So you opt for the market-place?' She nodded. 'Come on,' he grasped her arm, 'I'll see you to it. Stay there until I join you. I'll wander about until I find you.'

As they approached the market-place, she frowned. 'There are a lot of people, so how will you—?'

'I think I'll manage to identify a girl who has hair the colour of my own, and whose other - characteristics are not so easy to forget.' He grinned down at her. 'Enjoy yourself.' Then he was gone, lost amongst the crowds.

Before weaving her way between the milling, rambling mass of people who sought and delved for bargains on the stalls, Maretta wandered through the

flint-cobbled narrow streets, past gracious town houses and peering down alleys that led mysteriously off the main routes. There were antique shops and galleries of art and now and then there was the sight of archaeological digs, excavations which, she assumed, were still being conducted into the city's past.

She bought a guide book and read about Mousehold Heath, just outside the city, where Robert Kett in the mid-sixteenth century banded together his followers before the march on the city in the Peasants' Revolt. There were, she read, thirty-three medieval churches within the old walls. There was Elm Hill, with its cobbled street and overhanging houses, preserved as it was four hundred years ago.

As she wandered back towards the market-place, she saw the ancient Guildhall with its walls constructed of Norfolk flint. It was, the book said, begun in 1407 and for five hundred years was the seat of local government.

She paused to look at the rows of stalls, their brightly- covered awnings giving the place a continental air. The striped awnings were known locally as 'tilts'. There had been a market-place on the present site for nine hundred years. The sun shone and shadows cast by the branches of trees interlaced and moved under her feet.

There was the chatter of people, snatches of music, the irresistible sales patter of some of the stallholders. The fruit stalls had their own smells, some good, some bad. Everywhere there were flowers, their brilliant colours catching the eye. The soft knitting yarns cried out to be squeezed in the hand, the yards of bright cloth had to be fingered and stroked and were a reminder that Norwich was once a flourishing centre of the wool trade, exporting its goods, the book informed her, to both Scandinavia and Western Europe. It was renowned for its worsteds which it sent as far away as North America, Russia and the Far East.

'Odd,' a taunting voice said beside her, 'how we have at least one thing in common. Besides the colour of our hair, that is.'

Maretta tensed and caught her breath. Rhian was back. His hands were empty. He read her thoughts and said, 'The supplier was out of stock of the vital part.'

'So you'll have to wait to get the camera back? I'm sorry,' stiffly, 'to have caused you so much trouble and to have interfered with your work.'

'I hope,' he said mockingly, but Maretta heard the hard note beneath, 'your guilt sits heavily on your elegant shoulders. The delay will cause me considerable inconvenience.'

She turned away. 'I've already apologized once.'

He strolled beside her, his eyes caught by the contents of the stalls. 'I said we had one thing in common. It's as well, considering the things that are to come.'

Once again his words mystified her, but she asked, 'Well, what have we got in common?'

'This,' indicating the noise, the husde, the cries of the traders, the arguing customers. 'Whenever I'm in town I make straight for the market. You'd think,' with a tight smile, 'with a bit of ingenuity, we could build up a kind of affinity on that fact alone.'

'I fail to see,' she responded frigidly, 'any reason why we should try to establish any kind of affinity at all. I'm here as a guest, a - a friend of your father's. When I leave at the end of my stay, I can't see any reason why we two should ever meet again.'

Without warning, she found him facing her, blocking her way, making them into an island and forcing people to walk round them. He looked into her face, eyes narrow. 'You really can't, can you?'

Anger, irrational and sudden, shot through her. 'Will you leave me alone?'

People passed, smiling. 'A lovers' quarrel,' they were thinking.

Ehian took his place at her side again and they walked on. His strides lengthened, to keep up with Maretta's faster pace. 'No,' he said thoughtfully, 'I doubt very much if I shall leave you alone.'

'You sicken me,' she said between her teeth, then was filled with remorse at her rudeness. He was the son of her host. She had no right to speak in such a way to this man who was, after all, little more than a stranger. She had known him so short a length of time. His silence, his drawn brows, forced an apology from her. He accepted it with a shrug.

She looked up at him, seeing his light brown hair, the way a piece fell forward trailing one of his eyebrows, the long, aristocratic nose, the wide mouth with its full lips. Her eyes slid away from the quizzical look he gave her.

A small thought nagged at her. He doesn't sicken you, it said,, he attracts you, he doesn't repel. There was his quick intelligence, the look in his eyes of absolute independence, of a self-reliance no matter how difficult the circumstance, how harrowing the ordeal. Hadn't he travelled over the world, lived in impossible conditions, coping with equanimity in both hot countries and cold? But, she thought with something like desperation, he *does* repel me - I can't even stand his touch. Why not, the nagging thought persisted, because of what it does to you?

To hide from herself the agitation of her thoughts, she lingered beside a stall, fingering the garments, lifting a white woollen stole, handmade and intricately worked, light and delicate as a cobweb. She imagined it resting across her shoulders when the air grew cool in the evenings. She asked the stallholder the price of the stole, and on hearing it replaced it with a sigh.

Maretta moved on, putting the lengths of two or three stalls between them. It did not seem to worry Rhian because he did not bother to close the gap. It was a haberdashery stall she was staring at, she realized after a few moments. The ribbons and the tape and the coloured buttons swam into focus from the troubled waters of her thoughts. Why was she always at odds with this man? Couldn't they come to terms on anything?

Maretta moved on, wondering where Rhian could be. Had she annoyed him so much he had abandoned her and gone home? A hand on her shoulder jerked her to a standstill.

'A cup of coffee might sweeten you,' Rhian said.

Having missed him when he was not there, now he had reappeared she resented his treatment, his dictatorial attitude, the rough side of him that came into play without warning. 'I don't want one, thank you.'

They were standing in front of a stall which sold refreshments. There was steam coming from an urn and jugs of milk stood ready for use. Rhian grasped her wrist and pulled her towards the stall. 'Coffee for two, please,' he said. 'And a couple of those long things with cream inside.'

'Chocolate eclairs,' prompted the woman, smiling at him over her plumpness. 'They're good. I should know - I made them myself.' She spoke with a marked local accent.

Maretta, who had been intending to refuse - she did not want Rhian Tudor to buy her anything - stopped the shake of her head just in time. To say, 'no, thank you' now would be to offend the pleasant stall owner, who took such pride in the products of her own hands.

'I'll pay for mine,' Maretta said, looking in her purse for some loose coins.

'You're too late. I've paid.' Rhian accepted the change then propped his elbow on the counter, lifting his coffee mug high. 'To our future relationship,' he murmured, taking a drink and adding, looking at her narrowly over the rim, 'whatever form it might take.'

'I have no intention,' Maretta responded, 'of having any relationship whatsoever with you in the future.'

Rhian merely laughed, offering her the other eclair. With reluctance she accepted it, taking a bite. Rhian had downed his in a few mouthfuls, but hers was not so easily managed. To her dismay, the cream found its way all over

her mouth and chin. Rhian jeered, 'It's obvious you're not used to roughing it.'

'And you are?'

'Of course. I told you, the world is my village. I've lived rough and slept rough. It goes with my job.'

Maretta tried to find her handkerchief to remove the remains of the eclair, but it eluded her. Rhian commented with amusement, 'There's cream on your chin.'

Before she was aware of his intention, his hand was behind her head and a handkerchief was wiping her face.

'Rhian, *darling*.' The hand holding the handkerchief stilled, paused, then continued with its cleaning-up operation. But the girl on the receiving end of his ministrations twisted away and stared at the newcomer.

Rhian pushed his handkerchief into his pocket and kept his hand there. He did not seem greatly pleased with either the words or the arrival of the woman who had spoken them. She was tall - taller than Maretta. Her hair was a rich auburn, hanging below her shoulders and parted centrally to curve away on each side of her forehead. Her eyes were brown and audacious, her lips shaped into an enticing smile. Her dress was low-cut and high-waisted, emphasizing the seductive shape beneath.

'I thought I'd find you here, darling,' the young woman said. 'Who's your friend, Rhian?' She looked curiously at Maretta.

'I told you on the phone,' Rhian said tersely, 'that I'd be otherwise engaged.'

'Introduce me to your - friend, darling.'

Rhian shrugged carelessly. 'Maretta, this is Doranne Forester, a friend of mine. Doranne, Maretta Newell.' He paused, glancing obliquely at Maretta. 'A friend and colleague - a very junior colleague - of my father's.'

Maretta smarted at the description. Was it his intention to make her look small in front of his girl-friend? She caught the edge of his look and knew that she had guessed right. Well, she would relieve him of her embarrassing presence. He could have his girl-friend to himself.

'If I'd known you had arranged to meet Miss Forester this afternoon, I wouldn't have dreamt of coming.' She looked at her watch. 'Please excuse me, Dr. Tudor. I'll find the bus station and get back to your father.'

Doranne Forester frowned, then smiled. '*Doctor* Tudor, Rhian? Why is she so formal? If she's a friend of the family—'

'Of my father, I said,' Rhian responded a little grimly. 'And for some reason, *Miss Newell* regards herself as being only one up the academic ladder from the tea woman at her place of work, which also happens to be my father's. She looks on herself as being on such a low intellectual plane, she can't regard herself as our equal.' Maretta flung away. She had had enough. But Rhian gripped her wrist. 'I'll take you back.'

With violence, Maretta freed herself, disregarding the burning friction of Rhian's fingers on her skin. She ran into the crowds, losing herself among the laughing, jostling people.

'Why didn't you wait for me?' Rhian flung the question at Maretta's back as she stared at a picture on the wall of the dining-room. Dinner was ready, but Harford had not yet appeared.

'My company wasn't wanted, so I did the only possible thing. I left you to enjoy Miss Forester's charms without the embarrassment of having to consider the presence of a third person. If you'd told me you had arranged to meet your girlfriend—'

'I had not arranged to meet my girl-friend.'

'But I heard you talking to her on the phone.'

'Then you must also have heard me tell her I'd be otherwise engaged, by which I meant I wouldn't be able to see her. She obviously had other ideas and decided to try to track me down. As you know, she succeeded. How did you get back?'

'By bus. How else?'

'If you hadn't scurried away like a bird being chased by a cat, I would have come with you. And,' he drew a package from his pocket, 'given you this on the return journey.' He held it out. At her hesitation, 'Go on, take it. If my father can give you presents, so can I. After all,' with a cynical smile, 'it's all in the family.'

'But,' her hands hung rigidly at her sides, 'the binoculars were not a present. They were intended to help me when I go bird-watching with him.'

'A present, none the less. Don't split hairs. You've caught my father's pedantry.'

She flushed at the criticism and looked at the packet. Her hand came out to take it because she did not find within herself the necessary courage to say 'no' to this man.

There were two or three layers of tissue, then she saw the gift. It was the lacy woollen stole she had gazed at so longingly in the market-place. So that was what he had been doing when he had lingered behind after she had admired the stole - buying it for her! But why, she asked herself, why?

'Don't you dare try to give it back to me,' he warned, 'because if you do, I shall probably,' he moved towards her, his hands lifting towards her throat, 'throttle you with it.'

Maretta backed away, afraid not so much of his threat but of the feel of his hands. 'I - I -' She shook her head. 'It's beautiful. It was very thoughtful of you and I - I appreciate it very much.'

The door opened and Harford came in. His eyes saw the tableau and it was plain from his sudden frown that he did not like what he saw.

Deliberately, it seemed, his son moved towards their guest, took the stole from her, unfolded it and draped it across her shoulders. Her dress was low-cut with narrow shoulder-straps and the lacy texture caressed her skin. She lifted her eyes to Rhian's, saw his sardonic smile and shifted her gaze to his father. Harford's expression was set, his mouth tight.

Rhian, having adjusted the stole to his satisfaction, rested his hands high on Maretta's arms and, with his thumbs, gently massaged the soft flesh. She could not move away, she could not lower her eyes which once again had sought his. If he had kissed her, and every line of his body gave the appearance of a man about to do just that, she could not have held him off. She would not have wanted to.

Harford walked quickly to the table. The paces he took were those of an angry man. The spell was broken, Maretta's eyes were freed and she looked at her host with a touch of guilt. But was there anything to be guilty about? She had done nothing - only accepted a gift from his son.

Harford was pale, his lips above the beard a thin line. Compassion moved Maretta to go towards him, to attempt to explain. But how to explain without hurting the feelings of one of these men? Father and son? They might have been bitter adversaries.

'You'll need to change,' Harford said when dinner was over. He looked at her sandals. 'Strong shoes for the walk, clothes to suit the conditions inside the barn.'

'A scarf for your head,' said his son, grinning, 'to keep the bats out of your hair.' He laughed loudly at her look of alarm.

'Stop frightening her, Rhian,' his father said sharply. 'Anyway, you know that's not true.'

Rhian shrugged and left them. Maretta changed into blue denim jacket and jeans and wore a white roll-necked sweater. Their shadows grew longer as she walked with Harford across the fields, picking their way carefully over

the bumpy ground left fallow, Harford explained, and free of crops for a year to avoid exhausting the soil.

'Listen,' the professor said, 'to that raucous sound.' Maretta heard the screeching and flapping of wings all around them, which faded as the birds went on their noisy way towards the house. 'Swifts,' Harford told her, 'once known as the "devil bird" because of that noise which they make on summer evenings.'

The barn looked old and was constructed of flint and stone. There was a doorway without a door, rectangular holes for windows, a sloping slate roof.

The professor's eyes lifted at a twittering overhead. 'House martin,' he said, pointing. 'They build their nests of mud under the eaves of barns and houses.' He smiled down at Maretta. One thing he had in common with his son was his height. 'They suffer from overcrowding as the season advances. Once thirteen birds were counted in a single nest, an unwise tendency to congregate which they share with human beings.'

Maretta looked at the barn. It would take courage to go into the semi-darkness of that unknown place. They were near the entrance when Harford's hand seized her arm and held her still.

The sun had almost finished setting and overhead a white, ghost-like form beat its wings, searching for food. The plumage on its back was a mottled golden buff colour, but its face and underparts were a soft, striking white. The bird did not hover. It checked itself in flight and dived on its prey. It was too dark now for Maretta to identify its unfortunate victim. The bird rose, carrying its kill in its foot.

'Barn owl,' Harford whispered, watching its flight as it swooped low into the barn and out again.

'Come along,' he said, leading the way into the stone building. 'There's nothing to fear.' His hand rested momentarily on her back, patting her reassuringly. Whether she wanted to or not, she had to follow. Were there bats, as Rhian had asserted? She did not dare to voice her fears to Harford,

who would no doubt dismiss them kindly but firmly as childish. All the same, Maretta cowered a little as she looked up into the rafters.

'The owl will return soon,' Harford said. 'Until then, we'll wait. Sit beside me, Maretta.' He smiled at her. 'Patience is needed in this game, a great deal of it. You're young and therefore restless. Do you think you have the necessary patience?'

Maretta was sure she did not, but she could not tell her host. Why else was she staying with him if not to cultivate an interest in the subject so dear to his heart? So she nodded, pacifying the slight feeling of self-reproach she experienced by thinking how much her innocent lie would please him. He was pleased, and squeezed her hand, giving his entire attention after that to the setting up of his equipment.

After that there was nothing to do but wait in silence. Harford insisted on that. The slightest noise, he had said, could frighten the owl away. Its sense of hearing was acute and it was able to pinpoint the smallest sound. The moon must have risen because its pale light flung through the entrance a river of silver, splashing the straw-strewn floor and grey stone walls, blackened with grime from the passing years.

There was a flapping of wings in the doorway, momentarily blotting out the light. Then the wide-winged, silent form swooped into the barn, settling on a beam. In the moonlit darkness it was visible through the snowy whiteness of its underside. Two eyes shone and Maretta held her breath. Was Harford quick enough to catch this beautiful creature on film?

He was experienced in the art of bird photography. That was obvious in the way he worked silently and swiftly. The camera shutter made a minimum of noise as the pictures were taken. The owl was so surprised it did not move. But it was disturbed by some noise other than that made by the camera, a noise which seemed to come from the doorway.

The great bird rose from its perch and with a prolonged, strangled shriek, flew round the barn with outstretched wings, dipping, rising and hovering momentarily over their heads. Maretta, her nerves already stretched by an

unbearable tension, gave a frightened cry and cowered against Harford. Would the bird swoop, thinking they were prey?

Harford's arms came round her, holding her protectively while the bird made for the doorway, disappearing at last into the silvery darkness of the evening.

'I'm sorry, I—' But she could not continue because fear had caught up with her again, a fear greater than that created by the cry and flight of the owl. What was it Harford was saying? He was murmuring, his reserve cast aside, his palm feeling her cheek, touching her hair, his arm pulling her against him.

Maretta strained away, unable to understand his meaning. 'My dear, dear girl,' like a blind man he was feeling her face in the darkness, 'let me kiss you. I've waited so long, so long ... The time has seemed interminable ... I thought you would never come ...' His fingers found her lips. 'Let me kiss these. They belong - they belong to—' The rest was lost as the professor's mouth covered hers.

She could do nothing but let him have his way. There was inside her a welling up of compassion for this man, whose warmth and human needs she was only just beginning to discover under the gentle learnedness, the brilliant brain. When his mouth lifted from hers, he was shaking. His voice wavered a little as he said, 'I respect your innocence, I revere it.' He was talking incomprehensibly, he did not seem himself. 'My faithfulness has matched yours.'

Maretta began to tremble, afraid at what might happen to him, to herself at his hands.

Her fear must have become manifest to him, piercing his consciousness, bringing him back from wherever he had drifted. His voice was normal as he said, 'There's no need to fear me. I shall not attempt to deprive you of your innocence. I shall do nothing to harm you. How could I? How could I, when—' He ran his hand over his face, seeming bewildered and troubled.

She was glad now she had not repelled him. Her body, her heart overflowed with tenderness and pity. She put up her hands and held his head, bringing it

down towards her. The professor's arms came forward to rest on her waist. Her lips made contact with his cheek - and a torch beam sliced into the darkness, its yellow stream of light coming cruelly to rest on the two straining figures.

Their eyes were drawn towards it, only to flounder and drop like spent moths before its searing beam. Whoever it was must have been the creator of the noise which had caused the owl's flight. Whoever it was must have witnessed the entire scene, the kissing, the murmurs, the response.

By the deep, angry breathing, by the height and breadth of the man outlined in the doorway, they both knew who it was.

'Son,' Harford murmured, his fingers working over his eyes, 'son ...'

Now the torch beam settled on Maretta, running the length of her like a contemptuous, condemning gaze. It clicked off and there was darkness again and the hard beat of footsteps carrying the watcher away.

CHAPTER FIVE

As they returned across the furrowed field, stumbling in the moonlight, Harford asked Maretta's forgiveness. 'It's so many years since I've known the companionship of a woman - not, in fact, since my wife died. I have never forsaken her memory, I've kept it fresh in my mind. Now I've met you. Maretta,' he stopped, holding her arm, 'tell me you won't object if now and then I indulge my feelings for you, if I - I kiss you?'

That humility again, a humility which brought tears to her eyes, coming as it did from so distinguished, so *good* a man! She was aware of the age gap between them, but not overpoweringly so. He was tall, he was slim, he did not look his age. His manners, his consideration and his outlook came of a different generation, of course. They were the oldest, and the nicest thing about him.

But Maretta recalled, with a heightening of colour, the son's words about his father's undiminished virility. If Harford kissed her again ... If she told him she did not object, it would alter their relationship entirely. No man could continue to kiss a woman without its leading to - to what? Fulfilment, love? No, she did not love Harford, but she felt for him admiration and deep compassion.

If she said no, he could not kiss her - the pain, she told herself, the humiliation she would inflict on him ...

'I don't mind,' she whispered, and heard the long sigh, the release of anxiety and the beginnings of - hope?

The next day passed, a day of fear of meeting Rhian Tudor, but Maretta did not see him again until they dined that evening. He was dressed in a blue suit of excellent cut, his golden-brown hair lifting in a slight curve at the side of his head. There was a narrow belt around his waist which emphasized his leanness and the firm width of his hips. His shirt was white with a blue-flecked pattern and the cuffs showed, an immaculate white, at his wrists.

He smiled as if he found Maretta's scrutiny amusing, but behind the smile was a touch of ice. No, he had not forgotten the scene in the barn, when he had watched his father take her in his arms.

If he had not forgotten, Maretta had not forgiven. Such a moment of tenderness, such words spoken with the deepest sincerity by a man in great need, should not have been overheard, not even, Maretta reflected with a curious twist of her thoughts, by herself at whom they had been directed.

Now the examination was returned. He considered her lilac-coloured sleeveless blouse, the flowered skirt with touches of lilac blossom in its pattern. He looked openly at her face, considering the uncertain eyes, the arched brows, the lip caught between her teeth.

'I know what you're thinking,' she said with a spurt of anger which surprised herself, 'but it's wrong, wrong, *wrong!*'

The eyebrows lifted, eyebrows just a little darker than the colour of his hair. 'When I look at an attractive woman,' he drawled, 'I don't bother to think, I just feel.' He moved to the drinks cabinet, found two glasses and poured two drinks, but the contents of each glass were different. In his was whisky. The glass containing sherry he held out to Maretta.

She was on the point of refusing when Harford walked in. 'Ah, Rhian, you're giving our guest a drink.' He took it from his son and handed it to Maretta. He seemed happy. 'Wait,' he told her, poured himself a drink and returned to stand beside her. 'A toast. To you - and to me.' He held up his glass, turning to his son. 'Join us, Rhian.'

The son's glass was empty, it was not refilled. It was placed on a table. Rhian slipped his hands into his pockets, looking at his father. It was a challenge. A challenge which was not taken up. Harford turned his back on it. I am the victor, the movement said, I have the prize. Nothing, no one can take it away.

During dinner it seemed that there had been a mutual, if silent, agreement between father and son to suspend hostilities, if only for the course of the evening. To Maretta, Rhian was unbelievably charming and talkative,

making her laugh and watching her face as she did so, holding her smile and making her laugh yet again merely, it seemed, to enjoy her amusement. He even put his father at ease by talking with him about his work, and his hobby, drawing him out and listening to the replies with what appeared to be genuine interest.

Harford, pleased at any time to talk to anyone on bird life, seemed especially delighted to discuss it with his son. It was rare indeed that Rhian was a willing listener to his father.

If Maretta entertained any suspicions as to Rhian's possible motives, if indeed he had any, she had neither the inclination nor the time to consider them. Talk over the meal was continuous until the coffee was finished, and suddenly she wanted to believe that Rhian's charm was genuine, that the ice she had imagined earlier to be lurking beneath his smile was a by-product of her anxiety.

When they rose from the table, Harford went to Maretta's side. He pressed her hand between his own. 'I must away to my hide while the light still holds. When the sun has set I'll be back and - I hope - find you waiting for me? I promise not to be out there too long.'

Even when his father had gone, Rhian was still smiling. As she looked at him, her heartbeats raced. Did he like her at last? Had the cynical manner he had adopted towards her since her arrival gone for ever? With all her heart she hoped it had. To know that this man was willing to accept her as a friend, even though it was of the family, would be a pleasure she had never expected to come her way.

'I'm off to my attic room,' Rhian said as they stood in the hall. Maretta could not suppress a troubled frown. Was she to be left alone? 'Care to join me?' he asked casually, watching her face. 'You could gaze at the horizon while I work.'

There was no question of hiding her astonishment, it was too great. 'You don't object to having another person in the room? Won't I spoil your concentration?'

His eyelids flickered and stilled. 'No more than the presence of a woman usually disturbs my concentration.'

, The charm slipped a fraction to allow the customary cynicism to show beneath, then it was back and Maretta, seeing the brilliance of his smile and feeling the reaction of her heartbeats as they scampered, mouselike, under her ribs, knew she had imagined the lapse. This man's ability to manipulate a woman's emotions came, she knew because he had told her, from constant and unrelenting practice.

They were standing in front of the wide blocked-in fireplace. Engraved in the wood panelling above it was a replica of the coat of arms which appeared over the front entrance. The heraldry seemed to represent the waves of the sea, interspersed with birds in flight and, unmistakably, the horizon, after which the house was named.

Rhian, following Maretta's eyes, said, 'You know Latin?' At the shake of her head he responded, 'I'll translate,' adding enigmatically, 'at this point in time it might be appropriate. I quote, "Beyond the horizon are the dreams; beyond the dreams, the reality". Which means, in twentieth- century language, that you can wriggle and evade the issue and run away as much as you like, but in the end you're forced to face the truth, however unpalatable it may be.' He gestured towards the stairs. 'Join me.'

He left her in his attic study, returning a few minutes later having changed into blue jeans and an open-necked shirt. He had peeled off his executive air with his clothes and now he seemed more relaxed and, to Maretta's sensitive eyes, more intimidating. This was a side of him which was an unknown quantity. Dressed executive-style as he was, his personality held power and authority, but was restrained within known bounds. In clothes like this, his manner relaxed to match them, there was no knowing the limits to which he might allow himself to go, the barriers he might smash through.

As Maretta wandered about, still wondering at his even allowing her in the room, let alone to hover near his possessions, she looked at the brightly coloured geological maps of the world which covered the walls. Besides the microscopes there was a hand lens and bottles marked hydrochloric acid;

there were rock specimens on shelves and small pieces of glass which she knew were slides.

Idly she picked up a piece of rock, admiring its colours, He spoke, staring her. She did not realize his eyes had been on her. 'From Scodand.' He came to stand beside her. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows and as his bare arms rubbed against hers - was he doing it on purpose? - she stiffened, but he did not appear to notice. He pointed to the piece of rock on her palm. 'It's called gneiss.

'Those wavy bands,' indicating each colour, 'black, white, pink, were formed by very great heat and pressure which acted on the existing rocks, squashing them so much they changed some of the minerals and concentrated them into parallel bands.' He smiled down at her, a gleam of amusement in his eyes. 'Am I blinding you with science? It all happened a very, very long time ago, one thousand to two thousand million years ago, in fact. Lewisian gneiss is the oldest rock in the United Kingdom.'

He wandered back to his desk and flipped through a pile of papers. 'That's the kind of time-span a geologist deals with. Far too enormous a step back into the past for an ordinary person to comprehend.'

She smiled at him. She could joke with a man in a mood as pleasant as Rhian Tudor's was at that moment. 'Shouldn't you have added those three maddening words, "little lab assistant"?''

His head came up and he saw her challenging smile. But her smile wavered. Was it her imagination, or was his good humour only scratch deep? Not even a veneer, but only a thin coating like varnish, glossy but transparent, hiding the blemishes underneath? But the smile he gave her, brilliant, dazzling, calmed her fears. Except that his eyes seemed strangely to dissociate themselves from it.

As he looked down again, she shook her head slightly, telling herself not to be so fanciful. She stood at the window, gazing over the extensive gardens attached to the house. Even at this evening hour, there was a gardener devotedly hoeing the shrubs. There was the woodland glade where Harford's

hide was hidden and the stream which flowed past it, with its wooden bridges here and there.

Farther away was the softly rolling countryside, the hedges and the fields, leading to - where? To freedom, to Rhian's freedom which he prized so greatly. More distant still was the horizon, hazy with evening mists. She thought of the coat of arms and the words it bore, the words Rhian had translated for her. And she remembered the way he had interpreted the meaning of those words, the slightly cynical slant he had given to them. Was he reading too much into them?

'Maretta?' His voice jolted her into an awareness of where she was. He had been sitting at his desk so quietly that her mind went involuntarily to the description she had seen in one of Harford's books. She had been reading about the barn owl, knowing that Harford would be taking her to see one. *Scarcely any noise is made by this beautiful creature as it swoops on its victim.*

'Come here, Maretta.' His voice was quiet, but it held a command she could not ignore. 'I'll show you something pretty.' She stood obediently by his side and he looked down at her, seeing her gentle smile. 'You know how to use a microscope? You've learnt that in the course of your work?' She nodded. 'This, as I explained once before, is a penological microscope. This platform - the stage, as it's called - can be rotated. I'll insert a sample of a mineral from a group called the chlorites.' She watched as his expert fingers manoeuvred it into position. 'Now I insert the polarizing lens. Look into the microscope.'

He moved back a pace to allow her to gaze through the eyepiece and she exclaimed at the kaleidoscope of colours which she saw. 'Rotate the slide,' he said, and at his bidding she did so, seeing the colours mix and alter as beautiful greens changed and merged into reddish browns.

She looked up, her face alight with pleasure. 'It's fabulous,' she said, then caught her breath at his expression. He was so near his body was touching hers, pressing her against the bench. Her pulses slowly, painfully, started to pound. They were throbbing with exhilaration - and fear.

His face had been wiped clean of all the friendliness he had shown her that evening. There was no more charm and _ no more smiles. The shape of his mouth had changed into bitter, biting contempt. So this was what she had glimpsed beneath his apparent good humour. It had not been imagination, after all. The antipathy had been there all the time.

His hands on her shoulders swung her round. As he twisted her, her hip caught on the edge of the bench, but although she cried out, he paid no heed.

'What is it you want?' he snarled. 'What is it you're after? My father's position, my father's money, my father's house? It can't be for love that you let a man twenty-eight years older than you make love to you in the blackness of a barn.'

'What are you talking about?' she whispered, her face white, her eyes large and burning into his. 'What are you saying? That I'm trying to get your father to fall in love with me and marry me?'

'Aren't you?' Anger gave a lightning brilliance to his eyes. 'If not, you surprise me. What is it you're aiming for, then? Love without strings? If so, I'm the man you want, in your own generation, able to keep up with your demands, able to give more - much more than you can take. Can my father give you this?' His arm, like a band of steel encircled her waist. 'And this?' His other hand came up, settled round her throat and forced back her head so far she cried out again. Then, when he saw the tears start to her eyes, his mouth swooped down, like a bird of prey on to its helpless victim, and with his kiss, he proceeded to extract the breath and life from her body. One kiss was not enough for him. He took another and another until, like an eagle's victim, she lay lifeless and still in his arms. Then he swung her roughly aside and went to the window, smoothing his hair as he walked.

He turned and rested with his back against the sill. His face was in shadow, but even so Maretta could sense the brutality of his expression.

'Now,' he grated, 'will you leave my father alone? Because if you persist in your pursuit of him, I shall give you another lesson and another, until I force you into the ultimate and absolute surrender, and when the time comes, if it

ever does come, for him to take you as his wife, he will discover that he's too late. You'll be mine.'

He walked past her out of the room, leaving her to contemplate the massacre of her dreams - those dreams that had dwelt, so full of hope, a formless yet a recognizable hope - beyond the distant horizon.

In the sanctuary of her room, Maretta walked about. She felt humiliated, insulted and bewildered. How could she face Rhian Tudor again? He had pummelled her pride and shattered her dignity. That threat he had made, the threat which, if he continued to misconstrue her motives, she had no doubt he intended to keep - how much had it stemmed from his mistrust of her and how much from that strange but bitter battle he seemed to be waging with his father?

Whatever it was, her place as a guest in this house was no longer tenable. That evening, while they drank their late- night chocolate, she would tell Harford, as gently as she could, that her mother needed her at home, that regretfully she must leave. If Rhian joined them, she would face him with calmness, however much the effort might cost her.

As she entered the drawing-room, she was relieved to find that Harford was alone. He looked up eagerly. 'I was hoping you would come before Rhian.' He lifted a cushion and removed a square-shaped box. 'I went out to buy this while you were with Rhian this afternoon. I didn't mention it at dinner because I wanted us to be alone when I gave it to you. Here, Maretta, my dear Maretta,' he touched her hand with something like reverence, 'take it. I've bought it for you.'

Her heart pounded. Another gift? What should she do? What *could* she do? But if she accepted, how would Rhian react? *She was afraid of him!* It was an admission which in itself was frightening. 'But, Harford, I can't, I simply can't—'

'A camera, Maretta,' he said with urgency, 'is an essential piece of equipment for a bird-watching enthusiast. Since I cannot keep lending you mine, you'll need this camera when you come with me on our outings into the countryside.'

She shook her head. 'Harford, I—' I - what? Will never reach your level of expertise, your overwhelming interest in the subject? No, she couldn't say that. I won't be here long enough to use it? Yes, that was it!

'I - I must go home, Harford. My mother,' she invented, 'my mother is asking me to return—'

He held up his hand. 'No need to worry about your mother. I intended to tell you over dinner, but was so carried away by my conversation with my son, I forgot. When I got back from town this afternoon, your mother phoned. I had, of course, to tell her you were out, but I chatted with her for some time. She told me to tell you to stay as long as I wanted you to stay. In fact, I gave her a standing invitation to join you here whenever she could get away. She promised to take some time off from her work soon and pay us a visit.' A small frown creased his forehead. 'I can see no reason why you shouldn't accept the camera, Marettia.'

'Please don't think me ungrateful, Harford, but I—'

There was a brief knock on the door and Mrs. Fiske carried in a tray of mugs filled with drinking chocolate. When Harford had thanked her, she said she would see whether Dr. Rhian could be persuaded down from his study, or whether he wanted her to take his drink upstairs to him. Marettia hoped fervently that he would decide to stay in the fastness of his attic room.

'Well, my dear?' Harford said gently, patting the empty place beside him.

Marettia joined him on the settee. 'First it was the binoculars, Harford, now a camera. I can't go on accepting gifts from you without—' She paused. She had been going to say, 'Without giving you something in return'. But Rhian's words still burned in her ears, so she said, a little weakly, 'without giving you something towards them.'

Harford was shocked. 'You mustn't even think of it. I'm not a poor man. One day I shall tell you more, but not yet,' as if to himself, 'it's too soon, too soon...'

He seemed to drift into a private world, so Maretta drank her chocolate. Rhian's remained on the tray, cooling fast. If she hurried, she might escape before he came down ...

The door opened. The newcomer's eyes settled on her. They saw Harford's arms which rested across a cushion behind Maretta's back. They saw the camera resting on Maretta's lap.

His eyes became flint-hard as they took in the quality of the camera and estimated its cost. 'Your birthday?' He spoke with forced lightness to Maretta, but the expression in his eyes did not alter. He knew the answer, of course, before he asked the question.

'No,' Maretta replied, looking down at the gift, her fingers resting on it, gently possessive.

'I gave it to her,' Harford said, smiling. 'She'll need it to assist her in enlarging and deepening her interest in ornithology.'

'You're accepting it?' Rhian asked Maretta. The quietness in his tone did not fool her into believing it was a casual question. Only she knew there was a threat mixed up in it.

She lifted her head proudly. 'Why shouldn't I?'

'You realize how much it must have cost my father? It's among the most expensive cameras on the market.'

She flushed. She had not known that.

'It's my business, Rhian,' his father said, his voice raised by the beginnings of anger, 'how much I spend on her.' He drew Maretta towards him, placing a gentle kiss on her cheek. 'If I wanted to give her half my fortune—'

'Please excuse me.' Rhian downed a mouthful of cold chocolate, hammered the mug back on to the tray and went out.

Next morning Mrs. Fiske told Maretta that Dr. Tudor - Dr. Rhian Tudor - had gone away. No, she didn't know how long for. 'Probably to London, Miss Newell. He goes off like that sometimes, but he usually tells me. This time he didn't say a word. It looks as if he went off last night, because his bed hasn't been slept in.'

Maretta showed what she hoped was casual interest and glanced at Harford's place at the dining table. It seemed he had not yet breakfasted. 'I'll wait for Professor Tudor, Mrs. Fiske.'

The housekeeper nodded and withdrew. Maretta stared out of the window. So Rhian had gone but had told no one. Had he left in anger? If so, why? She could not understand his attitude. What if his father did give her presents? Could it not be for the reasons he gave - to help her understand better his beloved hobby of bird-watching? What if he did now and then show her affection? There was such an age gap between them it could not possibly be more than a kind of paternal attachment. Those moments in the darkness in the barn - were those, she asked herself with painful honesty, 'paternal'? The endearments he had murmured, the kiss he had given her?

As the door opened, she turned from the window - and the truth. The thoughts that had whispered their way into her mind could not be the truth, she rebuked herself. She must not imagine things, as Rhian was doing. She must not read meanings into actions which did not exist.

Harford came towards her, taking her hands and pressing them. 'You look so fresh, Maretta, so sweet, as indeed you always do.' He motioned her to take her place at the table. 'No place for Rhian? Has he breakfasted?

So even his father didn't know! 'Mrs. Fiske says he's gone away.'

Harford, with a nod, accepted the fact. 'To London, probably, which is where the oil company he works for has its European head office.' He looked at his watch. 'He must have started early.'

'Mrs. Fiske thinks he went last night. His bed was untouched.'

Harford's eyebrows rose, then he shrugged. 'It's his way. He cares little for other people's feelings. If he makes up his mind to do something, even on the spur of the moment, he'll do it, no matter how much he might upset other people's plans. But don't let us waste our time talking about my son. I'm off to the hide again. Will you come?'

What else can I do, Maretta thought, but agree? How else can I pass my time? Isn't that what I came for - to learn about Harford's cherished hobby? Isn't that why he asked me?

As they sat together in the hide, Maretta looked wherever Harford told her, was silent when requested to be, learnt whatever information Harford passed on and then, to her horror, promptly forgot it. It was, she was aware, a case of temporary but acute amnesia, brought about by an almost neurotic fear of being unable to answer any questions he might ask, professor-like, to test her knowledge.

It was painfully difficult for her to concentrate. Her mind would wander, dwelling on how pleasant it would be to be walking about in the woods outside, dabbling her fingers in the stream as it bounded over pebbles, dragging her footsteps in the carpet of leaves and smelling the fragrance of the wild flowers and shrubs and brambles. She would not, she thought in her waking dream, be alone. There would be someone walking at her side, someone taller than she, holding her hand, playing with her fingers, laughing down at her.

'A sedge-warbler,' Harford exclaimed, 'I can hear its song, a trilling sound. Look, Maretta, look there.' He lifted the flap of the hide a little higher. 'Use your binoculars. See it now?'

Maretta tried vainly to get the bird into her sights. Harford saw her struggles. 'It has a brown back with dark streaks. It's small but unmistakable.'

But Maretta could not spot the bird. It eluded her. She saw instead a face, fair-skinned and handsome, autocratic head held high, and anger in the hard grey eyes - anger such as he had displayed last night when he had kissed her so brutally. Shaken by the vision - had she *wished* his image there? - she lowered the binoculars with trembling hands, shaking her head.

'Look again,' Harford urged. 'Don't give up so easily.'

How could she explain that she was afraid to look again, in case she saw his son caught up in the lenses of the binoculars, magnified and drawn towards her?

'I'm hopeless,' she said, fighting against his pleas to make another attempt to find the bird. 'You're wasting your time on me, Harford.' All I want, she thought, is to think about that image I saw, to puzzle out what it meant. That she wanted him back? That she wanted to be in his arms again, taking his kisses, however savage they might be, and returning them one by one?

Harford was shocked by her defeatist attitude. 'You're only a beginner. It can take months, sometimes years, to reach the stage where recognition by sight is immediate and accurate. Bird song can be learnt by listening, but it's far more difficult to recognize a particular species on sight.'

Months, years? she reflected despondently. It will take *me* for ever.

Harford must have decided not to press her too hard on the subject, because after that he left her to her thoughts. At lunch he told her that the meeting of his ornithologist friends was in four days' time.

There would be a discussion and whatever time was left of the evening would be devoted to socializing. Later, as they said good night, Harford bent down and kissed her, gently, on the lips. 'You don't mind, Maretta?' he whispered.

Not wishing to hurt him, she shook her head.

No, she thought, as she climbed the stairs, she did not mind. There was nothing about Harford's kisses to object to. Her mind leapt back twenty-four hours, recalling against her will the kisses of the son. The memory caused such a tumult in her mind she could not bear to think of them. Or of the humiliation and accusations that had followed. After Rhian's insulting brutality, she basked in the tenderness of Harford's kisses.

For three days there was no word of Rhian. Maretta found that the time passed unaccountably slowly. It was almost as if she were waiting for something - someone? Determinedly she set out every morning to the hide, spending the hours until lunch beside Harford, valiantly using the binoculars he had given her.

The evenings she spent in dedicated reading of Harford's books, but she found her attention wandering from text to illustration, from page to window so often she began to despair. What had happened to her concentration?

On the third evening she was alone for a while. Putting aside the books, she went to the window and stared out over the gardens. She wished the room had a window that overlooked the entrance drive. Then she could see whoever called, any car that came along it and pulled up in front of the house. Any car? she tormented herself. One car in particular, long and low, as arrogant in its looks as its owner!

Disgusted with herself, she turned back to the room. It was time she stopped plaguing herself with thoughts of Rhian Tudor. It came to her, with a shock as she flipped the pages of a book, just how much closer she and Harford were moving, how their relationship was changing, imperceptibly, into something more meaningful - but on whose part, his or hers?

She grew restless and made for the telephone in the hall. Harford had given her permission to use it whenever she wished. Her mother's voice came over clearly and cheerfully, lifting her spirits and offering comfort.

Was she well? her mother asked. Was she enjoying her stay? 'I spoke to your professor,' Josephine said, 'the other day. He sounded so sweet. He was so anxious about you, about whether or not you're happy there.' With a touch of concern, 'Are you, Maretta? Are you happy? Would like me to come and stay? He told me I'd be welcome there at any time I chose.'

Maretta thought, My mother come here to stay? But she would only complicate matters! Hastily she answered, 'Don't come for my sake. Of course, if you want to ...'

Her mother must have heard the uncertainty, because she did not pursue the subject.

'Rhian, Harford's son—' Maretta began.

Josephine broke in, interest adding a touch of shrillness to her tone, 'Harford? Is that the professor's name? And he has a son? Maretta, you never told me! How old, dear? What's his job? What is he like?'

Patently Maretta answered the questions. She knew what her mother was thinking and hoping. The professor was too old, the son - a quick, rough calculation would tell her - would be just right.

'How nice,' Josephine said, 'that you have someone near your own age for company. Don't worry about me, Maretta dear. Stay as long as you like ...'

When the professor's ornithologist friends drifted into the house through the entrance doors, gazing round bemusedly at the splendours of the hall, he kept Maretta beside him. He seemed to be exhibiting her to them, showing her off as a special friend. She was, his hand on her arm told them, to be regarded as part of the family now, and part of his life.

If behind the facade of her conscious thoughts there lurked an unnamed fear of how the professor's son would react if he could see his father's possessive attitude, if he were there to witness the fact that she did not draw away when Harford's arm rested lightly round her shoulders, or drew her down to sit beside him when the talking began, then she did not allow herself to acknowledge it. Rhian was not there. He was miles away in London. What he didn't see, he couldn't come to know about. So she comforted herself and relaxed a little at Harford's side.

There were, of course, stares from the professor's friends. Some, mostly women, looked puzzled and a little condemning. Others, usually men, watched indulgently and perhaps, Maretta wondered, a little enviously?

The talk was about bird-life, about how unique and rich the region of the Norfolk Broads was for ornithologists, about the rare species of birds to be found there. There were worries expressed as to how pollution might be affecting the rivers and marshes and lakes that made up the Norfolk Broads. Someone, they said, should do something about it. You had only to look into the rivers and see the underwater plants, lift your head and catch a dragonfly darting, to realize the great beauty of the place.

The door opened and for a moment interest flickered from the speaker to the new arrival. He was tall, he filled the doorway, his light brown hair fell forward, only to be brushed back by an impatient hand. His eyes swooped round the room, settling first on his father then, narrowly, on the girl beside him.

'Hallo there, Rhian,' someone said, and many of the others echoed the greeting. Rhian nodded and smiled in response. He did not withdraw from the room. Instead, as he looked for a seat, the woman beside Maretta glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

'I must be off,' she said. 'I have another appointment in Norwich. I hate to leave before the food arrives, but—' The rest was lost in laughter. 'Take my place, Rhian. Come and sit next to this delightful young lady friend of your father.'

Maretta tensed at the woman's words, but Harford relaxed. He gazed up at his son, a small smile playing about his mouth. Maretta, turning her head, caught it and was puzzled. It was not a smile of welcome but more of victory. After Rhian's prolonged absence, he should surely be greeting him, not provoking him.

'Yes, Rhian,' Harford said, 'seat yourself beside "my delightful young lady".'

The professor's son looked at his father's 'young lady', looked his fill, walking slowly towards her. He must have seen the creeping flush in her cheeks, her jerky, confused movements and, as he dropped down beside her, felt the tension of her drawn-in limbs. He could, she was convinced, feel also the merciless beat of her heart.

Someone started speaking, but Maretta did not hear what they were saying. She was trapped between father and son. If she drew closer to the father, the son would condemn her - and, who could tell, punish her? - for doing it. If she pressed nearer the son, the father would not forgive her. Nor would she easily forgive herself. Even now Rhian's sardonic eyes, gazing down at her, mocked her predicament.

'Relax, sweetheart,' he murmured under cover of the loud, insistent voice of the speaker, 'I won't eat you - yet. That's a pleasure to come.'

Incensed by the familiar way he used the endearment, she flung back at him, 'Will you leave me alone?' Harford's warning hand pressed hers, and stayed there. There he was again, she thought, agitated now, flaunting his possessiveness before the whole company. And this time the 'company' included his son.

All through the discussion, in which Maretta had earlier been interested but which now seemed endless, she was aware of Rhian beside her. Every movement he made, every word he spoke - and he spoke surprisingly knowledgeably considering the subject was not his hobby but his father's - registered on her tensed-up body. Why did he have to return at that moment? Why did he have to be offered the seat beside her?

It was a relief when the housekeeper tapped on the door and rolled in the trolley - piled with sandwiches and coffee. While the guests ate their fill, Harford moved around and settled down to talk to a group of friends at the far end of the room. Maretta was left alone with Rhian. Uncertain as to what his mood might be, she glanced up at him. He smiled, offering her a sandwich. But he did it mockingly, not as a gesture of friendship.

'You look pale and hungry,' he said, flicking her with familiar eyes. 'You're wasting away. Have you missed me so much?'

She refused to be crashed by his baiting manner. 'Why,' she asked, wide-eyed, 'have you been away? I hadn't noticed.'

His laughter attracted the attention of one of the guests. The man, grey-haired, pink-faced, the top of his head reaching only a little above Rhian's shoulder, detached himself from a group and came towards them.

'How goes it, Rhian? You've recently come back from abroad, I hear. When will your travels come to a stop?'

'Never, if I can help it, Mr. Wilmer. I was born to roam.'

'You've no intention of settling down?' Mr. Wilmer glanced at Maretta. 'No woman in your life yet to tether you to a desk?'

He shook his head decisively, looking down at Maretta with a touch of cruelty in his smile. 'No female would ever tie me down to such a fate. If it's my lot to wander the world in the course of my work, I'm not complaining. I treasure my freedom as much as some misguided men their wives.'

Maretta caught her lip. That 'freedom' again! She began to hate the word. Mr. Wilmer laughed heartily. 'One day you'll find yourself trapped, Rhian, by a pair of appealing, feminine eyes.'

Again the decisive shake. 'Take your love, then take your leave,' Rhian said. 'That's the rule I live by.'

Maretta put down her coffee cup, still half full. She was not thirsty any more. Rhian looked at her, eyebrows lifted, but she turned her head sharply from his amused gaze.

'Have you seen much of Norfolk yet, Miss Newell?' Mr. Wilmer asked. Maretta told him, no. 'There are some delightful villages in the area. There's Hingham, which has close connections with the early history of the United States. One Robert Peck, a Puritan sympathizer, fled to America and founded Hingham, Massachusetts. One of his parishioners, Samuel Lincoln, had also gone there. His famous descendant was, as you might have guessed, Abraham Lincoln. Some way south of here there's Thetford, where Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*, was born. Nearby there's a fascinating place called Grimes Graves where prehistoric man worked in the flint mines. One of the mines is open. You'll have to do your duty, Rhian, and show Miss

Newell the sights of East Anglia, especially the mines. After all, it's your subject, isn't it?'

Rhian shook his head. 'You're making the usual mistake. That's archaeology, not geology. East Anglia is comparatively young and not of much interest to the geologist.'

Mr. Wilmer laughed. 'So speaks the superior being!'

'Superior? Hardly.' Rhian sounded a little nettled. 'Archaeology is just as vital a subject in seeking the history of the evolution of mankind as geology. It's just a different field.'

Harford joined the group. Mr. Wilmer persisted, 'So you don't hold that one branch of science is superior to another?'

'Certainly not.' He glanced obliquely at Harford. 'That's the one thing my father and I have in common - a love of science.'

Mr. Wilmer made a face. 'The usual story, Harford? Son rebelling against father. The younger generation mutinying against the tried and trusted values of the older?'

Before Harford could reply, Rhian drawled, 'Too true. My moral values and my father's never did coincide. Never will.'

'Don't talk about morals, son,' Harford responded with angry eyes, 'you don't possess any. You never did.' Turning his head, 'Sorry, Harry,' he rested his hand briefly on Mr. Wilmer's shoulder, 'always was difficult and he's too old to change his spots now.'

Rhian put down his empty plate, inclined his head to Mr. Wilmer and went out.

Harford sighed. 'It's lucky he's never in this country for long, otherwise there really would be sparks flying between us. Come, my dear,' to Maretta, 'meet my friends. I want to show off "my delightful young lady", as you've been called.'

Maretta's footsteps went where Harford bid, but her thoughts followed where his son had gone. What was it all about, this bitter feud they were fighting? Was there no love at all between the two men, no filial affection on Rhian's part, no paternal fondness on Harford's? That Harford was capable of warmth and tenderness she was beginning to learn. But what about his son? She was learning about him, too. He possessed a heart - how else could he live? But it was a heart of stone.

CHAPTER SIX

MARETTA saw Rhian again that evening. He came down to the drawing-room for his late night drink. While Marett and Harford drank their chocolate, Rhian asked for coffee.

Mrs. Fiske, serving him, said, 'T made it as you asked me, Dr. Tudor, but you'll never get to sleep with coffee as strong as that inside you!'

Rhian gave the housekeeper a faint smile. 'I need to stay awake, Mrs. Fiske. I have a lot of work to catch up on. I've been away five days, although,' he smiled disarmingly up at her, 'I doubt if my absence was noticed.'

'Well, I noticed, Dr. Tudor. Catering just for the apper tites of your father and Miss Newell's not much fun. They eat so little it's a wonder they stay healthy.'

Rhian bent forward to stir his coffee as it stood on a low table. Then his eyes lifted to wander appraisingly over Marett, who was beside his father. 'Miss Newell, at least, appears in good shape.'

Harford caught the insinuation and his colour rose. He stood. 'Come, Marett, I'll see you up to bed.'

Rhian's smile hardened. 'Keeping the wolf from her door, Father?'

Harford's bearded face, with its high cheekbones and deeply intelligent eyes, became a little gaunt. 'This is one girl you'll keep away from, Rhian. You'll not touch her, do you hear?' There was a twist of anguish beneath the words.

'It's a little late to tell me that,' Rhian drawled, leaning back and holding his cup between his palms. 'I've known her - how long? Ten, twelve days? I have my reputation as a fast worker to keep up, have I not?' The tone was light, the grey eyes steely.

Harford's arm across Marett's shoulders tightened. 'Has he - has he—?'

She looked up into Harford's pale face and remembered Rhian's kisses. Into her mind came his voice with its threat of retribution if she did not 'leave his father alone', forcing her, if necessary, to the 'absolute and ultimate surrender'. Had he touched her? He had done worse. He had raped her - with his words.

Maretta looked at Rhian and saw his hard smile, daring her to tell the truth. 'No, Harford,' she lied, 'he hasn't touched me.'

Harford's hand guided her to the door and there was relief in his eyes. But his son had not finished. 'See her up to bed, not into bed,' he taunted. 'Remember you were born a gentleman and possess the morals of an outmoded age.'

Harford turned quickly and said for the second time that evening, 'Don't lecture me on morals, Rhian. Your ethical standards, your lack of principles where women are concerned, have always disgusted me. I repeat, leave this girl alone.'

Rhian sat forward, knees apart, holding his cup as if it were a mug, staring into it as if it contained the answer to some insoluble problem. Was there a droop to his shoulders, a despondency beneath the rock-hard figure he presented? Maretta felt an overpowering desire to break from Harford's liold and run to his son's side, offering him comfort. Beneath the kindly gentleness of Harford's exterior, why was there an embittered, vindictive creature determined at every opportunity to give pain to this man he called his son?

Harford stood with her outside the bedroom door. He looked down at her with eyes so tender, a glimmer of alarm sprang into being inside her. She knew there would never again be that barrier of status and protocol between them, that division which their work forced upon them of brilliant professor stooping to notice the semi-educated young woman who was employed so low down the scale in his department.

He had stepped across the intellectual chasm that divided them and lifted her socially to be his equal. She might never know why, because she was sure that such a reticent man - reticent about his inner feelings - would never tell her.

But she did know now that his arms had come round her and he was kissing her as a man kisses a woman who appeals to his desires. She did not even try to pull away because she did not mind his kisses. Whether or not she liked them was another matter, but if it made him happy to kiss her, then she would not stop him.

'Please excuse me.' The frigid voice of the professor's son was like a rod of cold steel being pressed against Maretta's back. But his father only pulled her closer.

Maretta woke early next morning. It was a particularly persistent bird perched on a cedar tree near the house that must have coaxed her from her sleep.

She hugged her knees under the bedclothes and shook her long hair from her face. The day was so bright and beckoning she found it impossible to still the stirring of her instincts. Those instincts were to creep out into that sun-flooded morning and smell the newness of the day.

She dressed quickly, pulling on white pants and checked shirt, but she did not fasten the buttons. Instead, she tied the ends together, knotting them across her bare midriff.

Taking a breath, she unlocked doors and slid back bolts, then she was free as a bird in the golden day. It was exquisite to feel the sharp bite of the air on her exposed skin, the dew-damp grass flicking her toes through her sandals. Into her lungs she drew the perfume of the flowers opening to greet 'the rays of the sun. She smelt the veil of mist which clung to the trees and the hedges and the world beyond.

In the distance was the sharp bark of a dog; in the fields beyond the park a tractor started up. From the road in front and along the drive was the clink of bottles as the milkman made his deliveries. So, Maretta thought, she and the birds and the insects were not the only ones awake and about in the brand new morning.

Maretta's eyes were drawn back towards the house and she searched the windows, but no one was watching her, so she slipped off her sandals and swung them from her fingers, rejoicing in the feel of soft, dew-moist lawns under her feet. Her camera swung from her shoulder and she made for Harford's hide. But she wouldn't go into it, she decided. Instead, she would do what she had so often longed to do while confined by loyalty to the seat beside Harford's. She would go down to the stream.

Under the overhanging branches, it flowed and leapt and swirled over pebbles and boulders. All around was bird song, the dawn chorus persisting although the sun was rising in the sky. Even the birds sounded full of happiness and hope at the start of another day.

Maretta sat on the bank and rolled up the legs of her trousers. Then she dangled her feet in the stream, gritting her teeth at the coldness but relaxing as her skin accustomed itself to the icy temperature. She drifted into a dream as the sun warmed her back and gleamed in shafts through the branches and the tree trunks all around.

Twenty-eight years between them ... The professor would never do this. His youth, with its impulsiveness and desire for trying out and testing the unknown, was a long way behind him. He was brilliant, he was good, he was tender and gentle ... But he was in his fifties, while she, Maretta, was in her twenties. The age gap, the generation gap, the habit gap of mind and body.

There was the sound of footsteps and she turned quickly. Harford? No, his son. Because she was sitting on the ground, his height was magnified, turning him into a great, solid column of masculinity. His shirt was loose, draping over the hands which were in his trouser pockets. The buttons were undone, revealing the mass of brown hair, the breadth of him, the daunting maleness. If he took a woman in his arms and wanted to break her, he could do so at will.

Her eyes lifted to his face. What she saw touched a chord of compassion inside her, making it quiver and vibrate until she could hardly bear it. He had not slept. That was plain. Round his eyes were shadows, round his chin and cheeks a dark stubble grew. His shoulders, usually straight and broad, pushed forward. But even as she gazed, the customary cynicism moved like

a sliding door across his eyes, closing in the secret thoughts, the private areas of his mind, and shutting her firmly on the other side.

'What's the matter?' he asked. 'Afraid I'll do what my father dreads - bend you to my will and seduce you?' He shook his head. 'Rest assured that when I carry out that barbarous deed, I shall make sure I have more energy at my disposal than I have at this moment. After a night spent at my desk, my greatest need is for sleep, not sex.'

Maretta swung her head away, drawing her feet from the water and drying them with a handkerchief. She pulled on her sandals. Compassion had left her. His cynicism had wiped it clean away. Even when he dropped down beside her, she would not look at him. He leaned back on an elbow while she wrapped her arms about her knees. The silence was filled with bird song, but even so she had to break it.

'Beautiful morning.' There was no response to the commonplace remark, so she glanced at him, seeing how his eyes were staring, narrowed, unseeing, through the woods across the stream.

'Yes,' he replied flatly.

'How did you know I was here?'

'I watched you from my window.'

'Couldn't you sleep?'

'I didn't even try.'

'But how can you get through the day when you haven't slept?'

A shoulder lifted. 'I'm not unused to it. One learns to do without if necessary.' He reclined full length, lifting his hands and resting his head on them. 'One conditions oneself to doing without a lot of things if one has to.'

She was not quite sure what his remark meant, but it found again that chord of sympathy inside her - although why she should feel compassion for this tough, self-contained man she could not imagine.

Softly she said, 'You mean a mother?'

His head came round, his eyes, grey as a winter sky, looked coldly into hers. The question is irrelevant.'

Maretta felt rebuked and tried to make amends. 'At least you have a father.'

'Have I?' The tone was dead. There was a long pause and Maretta rested her chin on her arms.

'He's besotted with you.' He had thrown down a challenge, but she would not rise to it. He persisted, 'What do you intend to do about it?'

It was a question she could not answer. Instead she cried, 'You're wrong! He looks on me as a friend, a pleasant companion—'

'That kiss last night. Was he looking on you as a "companion" then?'

She would not concede that he might be right. 'He - he did it to - to get at you, to annoy you—'

His head came up. 'To *annoy* me? You mean to make me jealous?' He subsided, his eyes closed, his mouth curved cynically. 'You flatter yourself. Why should I be interested in a half-educated, rather stupid little lab assistant?'

His words hurt so much she had to hurt him. She had to do something, anything to shatter his complacency, to get even with him. Words would be no use, they would only bounce off his rock-hard nature. Twisting until she was kneeling, she bent forward and in her fury reached out to grasp whatever she could reach, his bent arm, his shoulders, his hair ... Her eyes blazed, her breathing was short and quick, her hands pulled, her nails dug and scratched.

He was up in a moment and had her pinned under him, wrists in his hands that felt like talons, forced back above her head. 'You little vixen! First you get to work on my father, now you turn your attention to me. Which one of us is it you want? Make up your mind.'

Tears started up, her lip trembled. How could he misunderstand her so? 'Please,' she whispered, 'you're hurting me.'

He appeared not to have heard. 'When are you going to leave my father alone?'

Her body squirmed and writhed. 'You're wrong. It's the other way round.'

He still would not release her. 'You don't seem to object to his attentions.'

'Why should I?' she cried. 'He's a good man, he's fair, he's honest, he's kind ...'

'All the things I'm not, of course.'

'No, you're not. You're hard, you're overbearing, you're—'

His mouth stopped the flow of words and once again she knew the bitter anger of his kiss. His body, which was not supported because he still had hold of her wrists, crushed hers. She knew an intense pain with the pressure of him, but she could not speak to save herself. His lips held hers in bondage. When at last he let her go, she lay pale-faced, exhausted, head turned away. Still she could feel the weight of him, although he had lifted himself from her.

Her eyes fluttered open and she saw that he looked down at her, eyes narrow, diamond-hard, holding the fury that was still unspent. Afraid of what he would do next, she started to rise, but with an arm across her throat he held her down.

He looked at her, with her hair spread about her, her almond-shaped eyes and full-lipped mouth still resenting the bruising kisses his lips had inflicted.

Grey eyes held grey eyes, then he laughed, his mood undergoing a sudden change.

'Stop fighting me, vixen, and lie quiet next to me.' An arm slipped behind her and rolled her on to her side towards him. He sighed, burying his face in her hair and breathing in its elusive scent. 'It's a long time since I had the comfort of a woman. There are times in a man's life when they're an absolute necessity. Or should I say,' his head lifted and an eyebrow moved provocatively, 'a necessary evil?'

Aroused again, she struggled, but he held her easily within the circle of his arm. 'Please, Rhian,' she pleaded, 'this is wrong. We shouldn't - we mustn't—'

He raised an arm and lowered it across her, spreading his hand over her bare midriff. 'Quiet, woman. I just want a bit of peace, that's all.'

So he had his peace and his quiet and in no time at all his wakeful night caught up with him. He slept, but the arm that was round Mareta never slackened, holding her to him. His hand against her was gentle now.

She scarcely breathed for fear of waking him. It was even impossible to look at her watch. It must be breakfast-time, she thought, feeling the stirring pangs of hunger. Rhian's face was towards her and she gazed her fill at the thickness of his eyebrows, at the firm sweep of his jaw, the full mouth which, in his relaxed state, lost its cynical tightness.

His vulnerability tugged at her heart and she closed her eyes, determinedly forgetting the lateness of the hour and resolving to make the most of this time when, for a handful of minutes, she was a necessary part of Rhian Tudor's happiness. So she remained passive and still, delighting in the nearness of him, of his arm which lay so possessively across her.

There were footsteps approaching. With her ear as near the ground as it was, she could hear them clearly. They were coming this way, briskly, knowing exactly where they were making for. It must, she thought, be Harford, going to the hide!

Struggling to free herself from Rhian's arm, she sat up, shifting a short distance from him. With a swift, agitated movement she jerked her hair back over her shoulders and hugged her knees, feeling like a thief caught taking the family silver.

Harford stood looking down at them, dwelling first on his sleeping son and then on Marett. She held her breath.

'Why are you here?' he asked. 'Your breakfast is waiting.'

How much could his searching eyes see? How much did his quick brain comprehend? Marett decided to speak the truth.

'I woke up early, Harford. I couldn't resist coming out and sampling the early morning sun,'

'And Rhian?'

The man to whom he referred was stirring. 'I think he worked all night,' Marett said. 'He saw me and joined me. He didn't have any sleep and you see what happened.'

Harford nodded, seeming satisfied.

'Where's that girl,' Rhian murmured, 'where's that girl I had in my arms?'

Frightened, Marett looked up. 'He's - he's dreaming, Harford. He's - he's thinking of his girl-friend.'

'Ah,' Rhian half sat up, grabbing Marett. 'There she is.'

'Rhian!' she gasped, pulling away. 'Your father - your father's here.'

Rhian let her go, rubbing his hand over his face and producing a grin. He shook his head as if in bewilderment. 'I could have sworn,' he tantalized, fully awake now, 'I could have sworn it was you lying beside me. I could have sworn it was you I ki—'

'Rhian!' She stood agitatedly. 'You were dreaming. Of - of your girl-friend.'

He lay back, resting his head on his arm. 'Yes, I was dreaming. But not of Doranne.' He grinned again, enjoying her discomfiture.

Maretta looked at Harford, lifting her camera to show him. 'I came to take some pictures of birds, Harford. But before I could get round to it, Rhian came and—'

'My dear Maretta!' Harford's tension left him. 'If you had told me, I would have joined you willingly. When you've had your breakfast,' his arm round her shoulders drew her towards the house, 'we'll go together to the hide and I'll help you take your photographs.'

There were footsteps behind them. Harford went on, 'I can't tell you, Maretta, how you're pleasing me with your interest in my hobby. It has come far more quickly than I ever dreamed it would.'

Maretta told herself agitatedly that she was not a fraud, that she *was* interested - deeply interested - in bird life. She turned defiantly, hearing a short cynical sound - like a smothered laugh - beside her. Rhian was walking with them across the lawn. The dew had gone, evaporated into the warm air. The early morning excitement had been muted to a lower-paced contentment of both birds and man. Even Rhian Tudor seemed content. He smiled a secret smile and she wondered what - or who - might be the cause of his amusement. She had an uncomfortable feeling it was herself, and that he was smiling at her expense, for having persuaded her to lie beside him while he slept.

They climbed the steps into the house and Harford left her at the dining-room door. 'Have your breakfast, then come to the hide. You'll find me waiting.'

When they were alone in the dining-room, Rhian said, his voice heavy with sarcasm, 'My word, you handled that cleverly. So you were there to take pictures? That was a bit of quick thinking on your part. I must hand it to you, for a simple-minded, untutored young woman—'

She flung towards him, provoked again, but his hands came up and grabbed her wrists. 'Ah, I have the key now.' His eyes gleamed. 'One day, right time, right place, I'll make use of it.'

Giving some pain to herself, she twisted her wrists from his grasping fingers. 'It was the truth. I did intend taking pictures. I didn't make it up. Don't think that just because you have a crooked mind, everyone else has, too.'

He moved towards her menacingly. She backed away and the door opened. Mrs. Fiske, carrying in a tray of breakfast dishes, noticed nothing in her hurry to get the food to the table. Rhian nodded his thanks to the housekeeper, picked up the morning paper and turned the pages. He stood reading it for some time, ignoring Maretta who tackled her breakfast with a sharpened appetite.

At last he folded the paper and put it down, sitting opposite her and taking up his knife and fork. He looked down at himself as if remembering his bare chest, then stood up.

'My apologies for appearing at the breakfast table half dressed.' He eyed her bare midriff, brows lifted. 'Are you going to follow my example?'

She could not do what he was doing. She could not button her shirt. If she did, it would mean first untying the ends of her shirt, which in turn would mean revealing far more to his interested eyes than she could bring herself to do. So she shook her head and continued with her breakfast.

Half-way through the buttoning, he stopped thoughtfully, then proceeded to undo all that he had fastened, pulling aside his shirt and turning his head to look at his shoulder. 'Come here,' he ordered.

Because Maretta was afraid of the threat in his voice, she complied. 'Look at those claw marks. Look closely. They were inflicted this morning by a little spitfire who lost control of her temper. Hadn't you better apologize?'

A surge of pain surprised her, her pain for him. But, she thought angrily, why should she feel sorry for him? He had provoked her into taking such an action. He seemed to be waiting and she did not like the narrow look in his

eyes. Now what was he thinking? She was soon to know. Haltingly she apologized and turned away, but his hand came out and stopped her, holding on to her arm.

'Suppose I show these marks to my father? What would he think of you then? Would he still regard you as untouched and innocent? Would he still want to kiss you? My word, that would get you into trouble with him, wouldn't it, discovering you're on scratching, fighting terms with his son?'

She jerked away. 'How can you twist the truth to your own despicable ends? You made me do it. You called me names and goaded me.' She turned away and he let her go, watching her closely as she took her place at the table again.

He said, his eyes glinting, 'I've got a hold on you now. Proceed too far in your love affair with my father...'

Maretta swallowed her retort and pressed down into her chair. He was provoking her again and he knew it. He resumed his seat at the table, his shirt still open.

'Please excuse my mode of dress,' he drawled, 'but what else can you expect of a crude oil man? Anyway,' he eyed the deep plunge her shirt made on its way to the knot above her midriff, 'it matches yours. If you can sit down to a meal showing all you're showing, then so can I.'

He poured himself some coffee without offering any to her, and retired behind the newspaper. He did not speak again until Maretta rose to leave. He moved aside the paper. 'I'm going into Norwich this afternoon to collect the camera you damaged. Want to come?'

'No, thank you,' she answered coolly. 'I expect I'll have more important things to do.'

'Please yourself,' was the laconic reply, and he returned to reading the paper.

The 'more important' things did not materialize, because Harford went out, too. He did not tell Maretta where, but assured her he would be home for dinner. Rhian disappeared for the rest of the morning, and Maretta assumed that he had his lunch served in his study.

The phone rang just after lunch. Mrs. Fiske called Rhian, saying it was for him. Maretta heard him say, 'Doranne,' then she closed the door. The conversation continued for some time and Maretta tried to shut out the murmuring and the laughter. Then it was over and there was peace again, but not long afterwards, there was the revving of a car and the roar of its engine as it drove away. Maretta thought, If I had agreed to go with him to Norwich, would there have been three of us again?

The afternoon seemed endless. Harford had given her more books on bird life and these she studied for a time, but when her concentration started wandering, she threw them down and gazed out of the window. Tiring of this, she looked at the time, calculating that by now her mother would have returned home from work. Harford had given her permission to use the telephone whenever she liked. I'll phone her, Maretta thought, and promptly did so.

Josephine said she was delighted to hear from her. 'Are you going places?' she asked. 'Seeing the countryside?'

'Well,' Maretta answered, 'Harford's so keen on his bird- watching activities, we don't go out much. I went into Norwich the other day. Rhian took me—'

'Rhian? Oh, I'm so glad you're getting to know him. Is he being nice to you, dear?'

Nice to me? Maretta thought with a rueful smile. If only her mother knew!

'I don't see much of him,' she said weakly. And when I do, she thought, we scratch and quarrel. 'He's combining work with a period of leave. He's gone off this afternoon,' she said casually, 'to meet his girl-friend.'

'Girl-friend?' Josephine seemed disconcerted. 'Oh, I see.' Her voice was flat and disappointed. Maretta knew how her mother's mind was working. 'How

could any man,' her mother was thinking, 'prefer another woman to my daughter?'

But all Josephine said was, 'Ah, well' A pause, then, 'If you would like me to come and stay, darling...'

The prospect now of a visit from her mother seemed more inviting than before. She was about to reply when her mother went on, 'I'm a little busy at the moment, but next week, or the week after, perhaps—'

Maretta said she would phone again soon and as she replaced the receiver, she recognized the sound of Harford's car, so she retreated into the drawing-room to await his return. He came straight into the room, his eyes bright, his mouth above the beard curved into an excited smile.

'I have something for you.' She took the small parcel wonderingly, and he watched her open it.

'Another present?' she managed. 'But, Harford, why-?'

The paper fell away and beneath it was a bottle of expensive perfume. It was famous for its exclusiveness - and its price. 'Harford,' her eyes grew moist. 'I'm overwhelmed. How—?' She fought to regain her composure.

'I just asked for the most expensive perfume in the shop, and this is what they produced.' Anxiously, 'You do like it?'

'How could I fail to?' she asked lightly. 'I'm aware of its value, but I've never been as near to it as this before, let alone breathed it in.' She removed the top and inhaled its fragrance. 'It's delightful, it's fabulous! When I dress for dinner, I'll use it.'

He nodded, satisfied, then said casually, 'I've been shopping for myself, too. Time I had some new clothes. My mirror has grown a little tired of reflecting back at me the dowdy professor image!'

They laughed together and his eyes lingered on her smile. 'You're sweet, Maretta, you're all I—' He pulled himself up, and shook his head as if chiding himself.

When they dined that evening, Maretta wore a low-necked, ankle-length dress. Round her shoulders she draped Rhian's stole. On her throat, below her ears and on her pulses she put traces of Harford's perfume.

Harford had changed, too, and his appearance made Maretta catch her breath. Gone was the creased, slightly neglected academic air. In its place was an outfit of modern clothes, a blue tailored suit with the look of denim but with a smoother finish. The fitted trousers were belted and under it all he wore a darker blue roll-necked shirt. They were clothes that even Rhian would not object to wearing. Nor did they make Harford look as if he were striving to seem younger than his years. They simply brought his appearance up to date.

With his clothes, his manner had changed. He was less reserved, more aware of the events around him, instead of shutting himself into a world of his own.

'You look fabulous, Harford!' Maretta said, her eyes admiring.

'I'm delighted you think so.'

'Your perfume.' She held out her wrist and indicated her throat and ears. 'I have it on. Its scent is out of this world.'

There was the sound of a car in the drive and a stab of brakes.

Harford looked down at her and Maretta noticed idly that he had even trimmed his beard. He lifted her wrist, said 'May I?' and bent his head to her throat, once again inhaling deeply. His gentleness, Maretta thought, as her head went back, his tenderness after the roughness of his son..;

She must have thought him into the room, because the door opened, but Harford did not straighten. Instead, his lips touched lightly where the scent was strongest.

Maretta was caught. While the son looked on, the father's kisses feathered her skin, but it was not those that had her tingling. It was the son's searing regard as he watched the two of them together.

'Harford,' Maretta whispered, her agitation unmistakable now. At last the professor stood upright, holding her shoulder but turning towards his son.

Now Rhian's eyes opened wide before narrowing into slits. He looked at his father's outfit as if he could not believe his eyes.

'You approve, Rhian?' Harford asked, with the smile of one who had outpaced the champion. 'I've spent some money on myself.'

'To some effect, it seems,' Rhian acknowledged curtly. 'The lady is more willing than ever now ten years appear to have fallen from you. Carry on with the subterfuge. You might even get her to believe you're only eighteen years older than she is, instead of twenty-eight, that you're forty- two instead of fifty-two.'

'I appreciate your compliments, even if they are slightly twisted and warped.'

Hoping to break the taut silence, Maretta ventured, 'Your father has given me some perfume, Rhian. It's fabulous. I've never had anything like it before.'

'I can smell it,' he said shortly. 'It pollutes the air.'

Mrs. Fiske broke into the harsh silence, and dinner was served. Conversation throughout the meal was between Maretta and her host. Rhian did not speak until coffee was served.

There was a pause in the spasmodic conversation and he said to Maretta, 'I collected the camera you broke. It's been repaired.' He felt in his pocket and drew out a piece of paper which he threw across the table to land within Maretta's reach. 'The bill for the repair.'

Harford frowned. 'Why are you giving it to Maretta?'

'When she broke the camera - the one attached to the photo-microscope - she said she would pay. I'm holding her to that promise.'

'But you can't do that! She's our guest. If she broke the camera I'm sure it was an accident.'

'Of course, but when I warned her the repair might cost a lot of money, she still insisted. So I've given her the bill.'

Maretta, taking up the piece of paper, tried vainly to suppress a gasp.

'I warned you,' Rhian repeated. 'Are you going back on your word and breaking your promise?'

Maretta's colour heightened. 'I don't break promises. I'll pay, as long as—' she paused, knowing how humiliated she was going to feel when she had finished speaking, 'as long as you give me time.'

Harford, incensed, snatched the bill from her and looked at it. 'You can't expect her to find all this money. In fact, I won't allow it.' He reached for his cheque book and found a pen. 'I shall pay. I'm disgusted with your attitude, and distressed that you should cause her such embarrassment.' His pen moved over the paper, his signature was underlined and he held out the cheque. 'Consider the matter settled.'

Rhian took it, stood up, scanned the writing and with drawn-in lips tore the piece of paper to shreds. These he threw contemptuously across the table towards Maretta and with a withering look, which made her draw his stole closer round her throat, he went out.

There was a long, painful silence. Harford did not apologize for his son. No doubt he considered the act had so broken through the bounds of polite social behaviour no words could adequately atone for it.

After a while he cleared his throat. 'Tomorrow, Maretta, I'm considering, weather permitting, going to Breckland, some distance south of here. It's heathland, open in some places, in others forest land where trees have been planted. I particularly want to go there to record the bird song. It's rich in

bird life and I've been promising myself for a long time to go back there and take my recorder with me. Will you come? I'd like to show you the place. It's the second largest forest in England.'

Maretta felt she could not let this chance of seeing some of the countryside go, whatever Harford's son might say, so she agreed to accompany him. Harford, delighted, came round to her, bent to kiss her cheek and said, 'I must, reluctantly, do some work. There's a pile of letters sent on to me by the university I must answer. But I'll join you again soon.'

Maretta followed him into the hall. When his study door had closed, she looked at the coat of arms high on the wall over the fireplace. As she read the Latin inscription, she translated it in her own mind, recalling Rhian's interpretation of its meaning. Then she wandered into the drawing-room, but checked her footsteps. The room was not empty.

Rhian was there.

He rose. 'Don't run away. I won't tear you up as I tore that cheque, however much I itch to do so. Sit down.' He indicated a chair, but she chose another. He looked her over. 'You're doing well out of the Tudor family. Binoculars, camera and perfume from my father, that thing round your shoulders from me.'

She tore off the stole and threw it at him. 'Take it back. I don't want it.' But as soon as she felt the chill round her shoulders, she regretted her action.

He caught the stole deftly and put it on a chair. 'What good is it to me now?' he taunted. 'I can hardly give my girlfriend a secondhand garment.'

Maretta pressed her lips, determined not to give way to her temper. He watched her bemusedly. 'I'm wondering more and more what the purpose was behind my father's invitation to you to stay here. To my knowledge, he's never before indulged in a clandestine love affair, but,' cynically, 'these days one is never too old to start.'

Still Maretta tried desperately to resist his baiting.

'My father,' Rhian went on, 'seems to be doing his damndest to appear younger than he is, and all because of a girl called Maretta Newell. Has he sold his soul, I wonder, like Faust who desired the beautiful Marguerite?' He paced the room. 'He gets himself a brand new image by buying new clothes, then he shows himself off in them, like one of his beloved birds engaged in an elaborate courtship display.' He stood in front of her and said with mocking amusement, 'Did you know that in many species of the bird world the male parades and postures in front of the female with feathers puffed out and wings outspread?'

Maretta rose, facing him. 'Will you stop being so cruel towards your father? He's a good man, unselfish—'

'This is a play-back. I've heard it before.' He imitated her derisively. 'He's sweet, he's kind, he's generous,' his tone changed and became savage, 'he's a fool, he's deluding himself, he's living in a dream world. He's out of his mind!'

'You're prejudiced,' she cried, 'you hate him—'

'I do not hate my father!' The words came so curtly from him he silenced her for a moment.

'All right, but you're still prejudiced because - because - oh, I don't know why, but I can see it in your attitude to him.'

'Believe me, I know my father inside out. I know what I'm talking about.'

'You're too close to him as his son to see him as he really is. I'm a stranger, so I see him dispassionately.'

'Do you?' He came closer, standing within touch. '*Do* you? I don't think you do. Because of your background, because at work you're a mere nothing compared with Harford Tudor, the man at the top, I don't care what name *you* give to your feelings for him, in reality it's nothing more than hero-worship.'

'You're wrong,' she cried, 'you're so wrong!'

'So you're falling in love? You're really falling in love with him? My father, a man old enough to be *your* father! By heaven,' he took her by the arms, 'you need some sense shaken into you.'

She tore away. 'Time for another lesson, perhaps,' she jeered, 'the lesson you threatened to give me if I didn't leave your father alone? Well, you're not having the chance, do you hear? You're never going to get near enough to me again to get the chance!' Her hands went to her cheeks which were on fire, to her ribs where her heart was pounding.

His teeth came together and his lips closed over them. 'Don't be too sure, my girl, don't push your luck. I'm not keeping my distance - or my patience - much longer. If it's the last thing I do I'll break up this cosy little twosome even if I have to rape you first and deliver you up to him secondhand, in which case he'll be so disgusted with you, he won't want you any more.'

'You're foul,' she cried from the door, 'you're loathsome, you're - you're unspeakable!'

'I'm a coarse, unrefined oil man,' he derided. 'What else can you expect?'

He had had the last word. She fled from the room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE telephone rang while Maretta was dressing next morning. When she reached the dining-room, Harford was in his seat. He rose when Maretta came in and he spoke agitatedly.

'It's unfortunate, Maretta, but I've had an urgent phone call from my deputy at the university. Apparendy someone very high up in the education section of the government announced without warning that he's visiting the college today. He particularly wants to have a talk with me. Since he's a VIP I could hardly refuse to go, so—'

'So you can't take me out?' She smiled reassuringly, hiding her disappointment. 'It doesn't matter. Another time—'

'But,' Harford resumed his seat, gazing out at the cloudless sky, 'the conditions for making recordings are excellent. It would be a shame if we had to abandon the project.' He looked at her uncertainly. 'If I could persuade Rhian to make those recordings for me, would you go with him?'

An outing with Rhian? And after their violent quarrel last night? She asked faintly, 'When would he be going?'

'I doubt if he would spare the whole day. If he agrees, it would probably be this afternoon.'

'Well, I—' She shrugged. If Rhian were going, why not go with him? At least she would see some of the countryside, even if it was in the company of an unfriendly creature called Rhian Tudor. 'I'll go with him,' she said, and Harford left her, saying he would have a word with Rhian.

Maretta had finished her breakfast when Harford returned. 'Rhian has agreed, but—' he seemed embarrassed, 'but he thought he would rather go alone. However, he said he would think it over and let you know of his decision.'

Harford came to her side and rested his hand on top of her head. 'I'm sorry about his attitude, Maretta.' He picked up a stray lock of hair and gazed at it

as if lost in a dream. Maretta had a strange, creeping feeling up her spine as though Harford was seeing her yet not seeing her ... When he spoke it was softly.

'You have such charm, my dear, I'm sure you'll manage to make him agree to take you.' He bent down, turned her face to his and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. 'Sweet girl,' he murmured, 'I shall miss you today,, but tonight I'll hurry back, then we can talk together.'

The dining-room door opened. Harford's lingering mouth lifted and he drew himself upright. He looked quickly at his son, smiled at Maretta and raised a hand in farewell.

Maretta braced herself for a tirade from Rhian, but none came. He took his place at the table and did not speak until Mrs. Fiske appeared with his breakfast. He thanked her pleasandy enough, but when she had gone, the silence descended again.

It became unbearable. Maretta longed to know what he had decided, but time went by and he still had not said a word.

'Rhian?' She looked at him imploringly.

He glanced at her, his cold eyes holding hers, but they returned to reading the newspaper. Was he enjoying keeping her in suspense?

'Rhian!'

'Yes?' His attention did not stray from the printed words before his eyes.

'You - you know what I want to know.'

He folded the paper and put it aside, clearing a space and clasping his hands on the table. 'No. Tell me.' His smile baited. He was enjoying himself, enjoying humiliating her by making her plead with him to take her.

'Are you - are we—?' He waited. She swallowed her pride and tried again. 'Are you going to take me with you this afternoon?'

He leaned back. 'Tell me why I should.'

Her tongue passed over her lips. How was it that he could reduce her to such an importuning state? 'I - I'd like to make the most of the opportunity to see the area while I'm here.'

He smiled at the sugar bowl, picked up a spoon and stirred its contents, making spiral patterns in the white crystals.

'Won't you have a whole lifetime to do that?' His eyes flicked up and he saw her puzzled look. Then he relented, leaned back and said, 'All right, if it's the countryside you want to see, I might as well act as your guide. But we'll go this morning. If I've got to waste my time, I might as well chuck away the whole day. So,' he pushed back his chair, 'I've been landed with two babies on my lap - my father's cassette recorder and now my father's girl-friend. But get ready fast, otherwise I'll leave you behind.'

It was warm, so Maretta wore the thinnest pants she could find. She teamed it with a backless top which was cool and short and did not meet the waistband of her trousers. She returned boldly Rhian's interested regard, defying him to comment on her bare midriff.

He lifted a picnic hamper into the back of the car and wound down his window, inviting her to do the same. As the car moved forward, he commented sarcastically, 'In the bird world it's usual for the male to do the displaying of his physical attributes, not the female. And in any case, the male you're seeking to attract isn't present at the moment, so you've wasted your time dressing up like that.'

'For your information,' she returned bitingly, 'I haven't dressed *up*. The weather's so hot I've *undressed*.'

An amused glance settled on her. 'You intrigue me. Reveal much more and you'll whet even *my* appetite, then you'd have two Tudors to contend with instead of one. What a choice to have to make - the father, getting on a bit, but nonetheless still virile enough to keep any woman happy. His head's in

the academic clouds, his standing in the education world is high, his qualifications formidable. And he doesn't have to count the pennies, nor even the pounds.' He smiled at the road ahead.

'The son, his virility beyond question, qualifications as good as his father's, highly responsible job. His manners in the right company faultless, yet there's a cruder, rougher side to him which, if she knew about it, would make any innocent young maiden blush with shock and embarrassment.' His glance flicked her. 'Are you an innocent young maiden? Would you be shocked if I showed you that side of me?'

The speed of her pulses increased until her entire body seemed to throb. Why did he repel yet at the same time attract overpoweringly?

He changed the subject and began to talk more seriously, telling her the history of the countryside through which they were driving. 'East Anglia,' he said, 'there it is all around you. Land of the North Folk - Norfolk - and the South Folk - Suffolk. Once its boundaries were almost impregnable. There was - still is - the sea to the north and east; the swamps of the Fens to the west and to the south the great barrier of an oak forest cutting off Saxon Essex. That was a long time ago.'

It was some time later that they bumped off the road to park on a flat piece of ground on the edge of an expanse of heathland. There was not another person in sight. Rhian gestured as he got out of the car. 'As you can see, this is one of the least densely populated areas in the country, although it wasn't always the case. It's called Breckland and once Neolithic man lived here. The early settlers liked the dry soil and the climate and found it good for farming.'

He took his father's cassette recorder from the back seat and swung it over his shoulder, carrying the picnic hamper in his hand. They walked in silence across the heathland towards the forest. Every step he took seemed to Marett to betray his reluctance to have her with him, the effort it was costing him to do his duty. He seemed determined to be unsociable. His manner was polite but studiously cool. Marett reflected sadly, He hasn't forgiven me for our quarrel last night, for the names I called him and, most of all, she sensed, for coming into their lives.

At length Rhian said, his tone indifferent, 'There's always a chance that we might see some deer.' When they came to a small clearing surrounded by trees which were mostly pines, Rhian said, 'We'll try this for size.' He threw down his jacket which he had been carrying over his shoulder. 'Sit on that, but leave room for me.'

The jacket was large enough for two, but when Rhian dropped down beside her, they were shoulder to shoulder. Maretta wished he were in a better mood. If he had smiled at her, made her feel just a little welcome, the day could have been a happy one. His arm, covered with dark hair, rubbed against hers, making her skin prickle. Such contact created in her a frightening response and she grew rigid in her efforts to keep from touching him. Yet part of her wanted - no, longed - to please him, although she could find no possible reason why.

She disliked him, didn't she, she asked herself desperately, as much as he disliked her? All the same, it would have been good to have been treated as if she were a pleasant companion and not a nuisance wished on him.

He occupied himself with adjusting the controls on the cassette recorder. 'That,' he said, raising his head, 'is a nightingale.'

Maretta listened to the song, responding to its beauty. 'They sing in daylight?'

'Often. I won't record it because my father must have done so long ago.' Again he listened, then he looked at Maretta. 'Now that I will record. It's a wheatear. They make a squeaky, warbling sound,' he pointed to a bush, 'low down. Sometimes it sings while hovering and sometimes in flight.'

When he had recorded the song and the bird had flown away he said, 'If I hadn't been recording, I would have pointed it out to you. I got a glimpse of it, blue-grey back - the male's summer plumage.'

She rested her arms on her drawn-up knees. 'How do you know so much about birds?'

He gave her a quick, cynical look. 'Of the feathered variety, I assume you mean.'

'That's not funny.'

'No, I'm sorry. In such *pure* company, it was bad taste.' Then he shrugged. 'I take an interest. A lot of my father's knowledge has inadvertently rubbed off on me.'

'Since you've got that in common, couldn't you find some way of getting together over it, instead of clashing with him all the time?' It was a question she knew she had no right to ask and that she was courting trouble by doing so.

His response was instant and angry. 'It's no concern of - yours how my father and I behave towards each other, even if he does nuzzle you like an amorous young colt an attractive, lively filly. You're not a member of the family yet and if I have my way,' his eyes darkened as he stared through the slender, bending column of trees, 'you never will be.'

She caught at her lip, fighting the strange despondency that touched her like a cold, trailing finger. Was that what she wanted - to be a member of this family? If so, whom did she want to open the door - and his arms - to let her in?

Rhian had heard the song of another bird, because the recorder was working again. There seemed to be a high, thin sound, higher pitched than other birds. 'See,' Rhian whispered, almost as animated as his father would have been, 'a goldcrest.'

Maretta's eyes floundered hopelessly and she shook her head. 'I'm useless,' she said, but he put the recorder aside, moved quietly so that he was crouching behind her and clamped both his hands to her head, turning it in the right direction.

'Now do you see? You can't miss it - it has a black- bordered orange crest from which the bird gets its name.'

Following his direction she saw it, a tiny bird which held the twig for a moment, then flew away. 'I saw it,' she said, her eyes alight with pleasure. 'I actually saw it!'

He released her head and returned to sit beside her. 'From which excitement,' he commented, 'out of all proportion to the achievement, I gather you don't usually have much success with bird-watching?' With sarcasm, 'That must upset the dreams my father has woven about you.'

'He doesn't know. A lot of the time I pretend.'

He laughed shortly. 'You think you fool him?' He shook his head. 'No more than you would fool me. He's an expert, and experts can always tell whether or not another person is speaking the truth.'

She blushed to think of the number of times she had pretended with Harford. He turned his head and saw her heightened colour, laughing unkindly at her embarrassment. 'You'll just have to try a bit harder to please him, won't you? Read the books he's lent you more carefully, study the diagrams and photographs.'

'It's not that,' she said, as if hoping that by explaining her 'difficulties' he would know how to help her. 'I can recognize the different species from the pictures. It's when it comes to seeing them in their natural surroundings that I can't cope. They move so fast, and I'm so slow in finding them, with or without the binoculars, they've gone by the time I've found them.'

He laughed briefly, then shrugged. 'That's your problem. I don't know of any magic formula which would help you. And if I did I wouldn't tell you. You got yourself involved with my father and his bird-watching. For what purpose, I haven't quite decided, but I'm having a damned good guess.'

'Must you,' she said tearfully, 'be so unkind? Can't you be a bit more pleasant? It's a beautiful day. It's my holiday-'

If she hoped to move him by her plaintive words, then she was disappointed. He told her tersely to shut up, picked up the recorder again and set it going.

She looked around her miserably, wondering what had caught his eye or his ear. Then she heard it - a quavering, resonant humming. When it stopped there was a rush of air and a bird plunged and zig-zagged along, tail outspread. She saw the bird, then, its plumage brown-streaked and patterned, but its most noticeable feature was its beak. It was very long and straight and as it landed on the earth, it used the beak to dig in the ground.

He turned to her. 'You saw it?'

She nodded happily.

'It was a snipe.'

'Thanks for telling me. I'll remember it, too - by its beak.'

'Then you can show off your newly-acquired knowledge to my father, after which he'll no doubt come up with another present for you.' He smiled down at the recorder. 'A car this time, probably.'

She heard the mockery and responded defiantly, 'If he did and I accepted it, what would you do? "Punish" me as you did before, teach me another lesson as you promised you would if I didn't "leave your father alone"?''

Slowly and with care, he put aside the cassette recorder. He turned to face her and she was afraid of what she saw in his eyes. There was a cold, calculating appraisal, a hard, gritting look about his mouth. 'Are you challenging me,' he asked softly, 'are you daring me to keep my "promise"? If you are, which is what I suspect, then I'll willingly take up that challenge. I'm experienced enough with females to know encouragement when I see it staring me in the face.'

With a swift movement he had pushed her down. Her head rested on a crackling pillow of leaves. He twisted on to his side and stretched full-length beside her. His hand settled on her midriff and his fingers moulded her flesh. With his other hand he jerked her face round, then his mouth was on hers, parting her lips, his own harsh and thrusting.

She struggled to free herself of him, but some brambles caught in her hair and she cried out with the pain, trying to tell him. But he was beyond the reach of all reason, intent only in impelling his will upon hers, in reducing her to a pliant, pleading submission, begging for mercy but receiving none. His hands, wandering, exploring, did not spare her either, and she felt her resistance ebbing away, giving place to a straining, intense response.

Her arms wrapped around him, drawing him closer instead of pushing him away, and every movement she made was instinctive and involuntary. He had taken away her powers of reasoning, leaving in their place only a striving, ardent desire to please and be pleased, to give as well as take.

When, slowly, his actions stilled and finally ended, her sanity returned and with it, despair. She rolled away from him, off the jacket on which they had been lying, and on to the trodden-down twigs and earth. Dead leaves clung to her hair, dust covered her clothes, but she did not care. She was in a half-world between fantasy and reality - fantasy that the man who had just kissed her so savagely loved her; and reality, that in his kisses had been pent-up revenge against his father and anger against her, his only desire being to inflict pain, his own ruthless brand of it. In that he had succeeded.

He had succeeded in something else, too - in implanting within her a longing for him to possess her utterly from that moment on and for the rest of her life.

For a long time he let her remain where she lay, her body racked with sobs. Through the mists she heard his voice.

'You'll have to stop some time.' No apology, no attempt at justification, no word asking forgiveness. But how could she expect any such thing from this man, who had a heart of stone?

Dragging herself upright, she pushed back her hair and wiped her face free of dust and tears. He was unwrapping the food Mrs. Fiske had packed.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but I couldn't eat a thing.'

He shrugged and continued unpacking the hamper. On cardboard plates and covered tightly in transparent paper, Mrs. Fiske had made individual salads. Rhian found a fork and, reclining on his elbow, proceeded to eat his lunch. After a while, tantalized by the empty void inside her, and by the smell of the ingredients of Rhian's salad, Maretta knelt up and raked in the hamper for her own meal.

She found a fork and balancing the plate on her extended legs, she began to eat. She gave him a quick, defiant glare, only to meet his amused smile.

There was fresh fruit salad in jelly in plastic containers and a flask of coffee to end the meal. Rhian repacked the hamper and fastened it, then, with his hands on his hips, looked down at Maretta. He looked for such a long time she lifted her head. He was smiling and for once it was a genuine smile. He bent down and picked some leaves from her hair and her pulses responded madly to his touch.

'Feeling better?' Her heart turned over at his quicksilver change of mood. She nodded, smiling back.

'Have you finished your recordings?' Her voice sounded small.

'Yes. I've done my duty, now I can relax.' He dropped down beside her and stretched out.

Her senses cried out at his nearness, her body tingled at the sight of him, his long, strong legs, the muscles in his upraised arms, the chest revealed by his open shirt. She remembered the hardness of him as he had kissed her, the unrelenting pressure of his body as he had lain against her. He could, if he had wanted, have forced from her that 'ultimate surrender', but he had chosen not to do so. She did not know why, she was only thankful that he had drawn back in time, because she had been powerless against him. Her will had not been her own.

His head was turned away. He was still, except for the rise and fall of his chest, but she sensed he was not asleep. He just seemed to be ignoring her. She wondered what to do. Unexpectedly he sat up and looked about him, idly picking up a stone and examining it.

'Is it interesting?' she asked, making conversation.

He made a face. 'Not greatly.' He picked up another. 'Now this is flint. The area abounds in it.' He looked into her eyes and again her pulse rate bounded like a newborn lamb. 'Shall I blind her with science again? This,' holding up the flint, 'is silicon dioxide. It accumulates from the skeletons of sponges. Putting it into very unscientific language, they drop to the bottom of the sea and are all squashed together.' He turned the piece of flint over. 'It can't be older than a hundred and thirty-five million years. .Comparatively speaking, quite recent. Norwich is younger still - it's on chalk which is only about five million years old. Thetford, not far from here, is older than that but is still only eighty to a hundred million years.'

His smile brought the colour back to her cheeks. 'You're turning me into a lecturer on the subject, something I vowed I would never be. Theory never did appeal to me. I've always preferred to put my theories into practice.'

There seemed to be a meaning in his slightly narrowed eyes that she tried to interpret. Rhian's statements often held hidden meanings, she reflected, but gave up the puzzle after a while. 'Please go on,' she invited, 'geology always has intrigued me - from a purely amateur angle, of course.'

'My word,' he scanned her face, 'I do believe I've got her more interested in bits of rock than my father has in feathered birds.' Her colour deepened at his accuracy and he laughed at her embarrassment. 'Well, now,' he rubbed his chin, 'what shall we tell her? There was a quantity of rubble left behind after the ice of the Ice Ages melted. A lot of the rubbish was fairly local, but some lumps of a certain kind of rock which came from Oslo have been found along the East Anglian coast, which shows just how far the ice travelled.'

He could see by her eyes that she was fascinated. 'What sort of rock?'

He laughed. 'Well, it was quite distinctive and it's called *rhomb porphyry*. Any the wiser, now you know?'

She shook her head and he laughed again.

'Remind me to lend you some books on the subject. You might learn something.'

'Well, at least when I pick up a rock and examine it, I shall know it won't fly away without giving me a chance to identify it.'

He laughed loudly and she wondered again at his lightened mood. He stood up and held out his hand. 'Come on. I'll take you way back into the past, a few thousand years, in fact. Archaeology, remember, not geology.'

She caught his hand and he pulled her upright, watching while she dusted herself down. He tipped her chin and looked into her face. 'No more tears?'

Dumbly she shook her head.

For a moment his eyes lingered, and with a stab of pain - and even of guilt? - she caught in their depths a glimpse of his father.

He said briskly, 'Good. The place I'm taking you to now is called Grime's Graves, but it's not quite as eerie as it sounds.' He gathered their scattered belongings and pulled on his jacket. They walked along the path which led to the car, and now and then Rhian bent to pick up a piece of flint. Marett followed his example and felt the sharpness of the edges and the smoothness of the texture where the stone had been split.

Rhian explained, 'The name "Grime's" probably comes from the Anglo-Saxon idea that the mines or indentations, as they appeared to people at the time, were connected with Woden, their chief god, so they called them "Grim". The word "Graves" merely means "hollows" or "workings".'

It did not take them long to drive there. This, Rhian explained, was flint country. On their way they passed cottages and churches built with the stone, giving them a curious, knobbled appearance. They left the car and as they walked along a well-marked path, Rhian explained that it was not until around 1870 that archaeologists discovered that the strange hollows were, in fact, the tops of flint mines which went down at least forty feet.

'The roof of one,' Rhian explained, 'had given way and they found picks which had been laid down by the flint miners thousands of years before, ready for the next day's work which was never to take place.'

Maretta said with awe, 'It must have been a fantastic feeling to have found them like that.'

Rhian nodded, taking her hand as they walked. His grip was strong and Maretta looked tremulously up at him, but he was staring at the ground. 'Red deer's antlers,' he said, 'were found in every mine shaft excavated, which means that prehistoric man must have used them as picks to remove the flint. One of the flint mines is open to the public. Are you game to go down? It's a bit dirty and dark, but it's well worth a visit.'

The circular 'lid' had been lifted away and they peered into the hole below. There was a metal ladder leading vertically down to the floor of the mine.

'I'll go first,' Rhian said, smiling. 'You look as though you need a bit of psychological support, if nothing else.'

He turned to descend the ladder, gripping its sides and telling Maretta to follow. It seemed so dark at the bottom, she had to overcome her fears, then she, too, turned and, facing the ladder, stepped down it. Before her feet felt the hardness of the ground, Rhian had swung her beside him. His hands moved to her shoulders. He held them there and stood behind her, and together they gazed around at the awesome sight..

The great walls of flint and chalk towered above them, dwarfing them. Leading off from the main chamber were tunnels, incredibly shallow and cramped to modern eyes, where Neolithic man had sprawled full-length, in almost complete darkness, searching for flint. Now the tunnels were fenced off and lit by a red glow to give light to people who ventured down there.

Rhian's hands moved to encircle Maretta's waist, and she leaned against him. She did not care what he read into the action which was, she supposed, a kind of mute surrender.

'Incredible to think,' he murmured, 'that these mines are around four thousand years old, older probably than Stonehenge.'

They stood in silence and Maretta felt the atmosphere steal into her, as though she was a primitive creature and at one with the people who had once worked down there. Now Rhian's arms were wrapped about her bare midriff and they evoked in her primitive responses which made her restive, arousing an impatient desire. Once she would have struggled from this man's hold, now she yielded to him in mind and body.

Sensing her mood, he turned her towards him and scanned her face in the semi-darkness. Then he swung her into his arms and was kissing her with a warmth of which she had not believed him capable. Beneath his passion was a hardness which strangely she did not resent, but to which she responded with all her being.

Skilfully, he exacted from her an ardour as great as his, and she knew that never again would she be able to erect barriers against this man. He had found the key to her feelings, he could turn it and unlock the door whenever he wished. It was, from now on, in his hands as to what he would do with her.

The rapture which intertwined itself around their bodies seemed as old as the centuries, as the rock and flint which stood guard around them. The present seemed somehow to merge with the infinite past. Their passion seemed older than time itself.

There were voices far above, childish, excited voices, and as footsteps crunched over their heads, they drew apart. Faces peered down at them and Rhian, kissing her once lightly on the lips and putting her from him, said, 'We're being invaded. I'll lead the way before they descend and spoil our private paradise.'

With a smile he put a foot on the metal ladder, looking down and telling Maretta to take care to follow him slowly. But the anxious children above were shouting their impatience and worried her. As she neared the top she saw Rhian's waiting, outstretched arms, but a hurried, carelessly placed foot slipped on a rung and her other foot flipped down to meet it.

Rhian exclaimed, telling her to take care. She righted herself by clinging to the sides of the ladder and bit her lip, feeling a graze on her leg beginning to throb. At last she reached the top and Rhian helped her out into the daylight.

A woman, the mother of the children, was apologetic and showed concern, but Rhian assured her he would take care of his friend. The family disappeared into the hole in the ground and their echoing voices could be heard clearly from above.

Rhian frowned, crouching down to look more closely. With his handkerchief he dabbed the grazed leg. 'Pity it's some distance to the car.'

'I'll manage,' she said. 'It's not that bad.'

But after a while, even with his arm round her waist, she began to limp and without a word he scooped her up and carried her the rest of the way. He smiled into her eyes and she could not understand the change in him. She looked into his face, studying the features, although by now she knew them off by heart. He caught her scrutiny and his lips lowered gently, momentarily, to hers.

They drove home in silence. Maretta's head rested against the side, a smile on her face despite the soreness of her leg. Now and then Rhian's hand strayed from the steering wheel to cover hers and they would exchange smiles.

'Tomorrow,' he said as they neared the house, 'I have to pay a flying visit to London. When I get back, will you dine with me?'

She frowned, but she could not tell him of her puzzlement, her doubts. Had she been wrong about him? Was his heart a human one, pulsing and drumming and pumping the blood around his body? Did he after all possess feelings and emotions which had not been warped by events of the past?

'Well, sweet, what's the answer?'

The endearment had her heart beating madly. 'If you want me to,' she responded softly.

'Yes, I want you to. I want a pair of clear grey eyes looking into mine over candlelight, I want two arched eyebrows provoking me, a tip-tilted nose to give me amusement and lips, perfectly shaped, on the opposite side of the table to me asking to be kissed. How much more poetic can I get? What more need I say to persuade you I want you?'

She coloured at the hidden meaning. There was no doubt from his actions that he did indeed want her, but it was his motive she could not understand. Love did not seem to be part of this man's life, it was something of which he seemed to have no need. Indeed, he seemed to treat it with scorn. Marriage he regarded as a burden and a tie. Above all things he prized his freedom.

So how foolish could she get, she asked herself, to allow herself to be drawn into this man's web? But like a fly, she was caught, irretrievably, and however much she might struggle, she knew it was a battle she had lost from the start.

Braking the car in the driveway, he came to her side of the car and lifted her into his arms. 'Put me down, Rhian,' she pleaded. 'I'm capable of walking. Someone might see us. Your father—'

The appeal only seemed to spur him on. Was there a sudden tautness about his mouth, or had she imagined it? He smiled again and now there was only tenderness there.

'It's a date?' he asked, as they approached the front door. 'Tomorrow evening we dine together, without fail?'

She nodded, and they entered the great hall. It was not Mrs. Fiske who came down the stairs to greet them. It was Harford, more angry than she had ever seen him. But it was an anger to which he did not give voice. He saw her injured leg and instantly became concerned.

'What has she done, Rhian? Where have you been that she could have hurt herself? I only asked you to make recordings, not take her somewhere dangerous. Put her down and let me look for myself.'

But Rhian did not put her down. 'I took her to Grime's Graves. Would you call that a "dangerous" place? She slipped on the ladder.'

'It's nothing, Harford,' Maretta said, stiffening in Rhian's arms and hoping he would understand and put her down. But he seemed impervious to all appeals to release her. 'I'll bathe it and put some plaster on it.'

'No, I insist on calling Mrs. Fiske. She'll attend to you.'

Maretta shook her head in vain.

'Take her upstairs, Rhian,' Harford said. 'Unless you'd like me to carry you, my dear?'

'*You* carry her?' The incredulity in Rhian's voice was carefully calculated to remind his father of his greater years and the dangers involved in carrying a woman any distance, let alone upstairs.

Harford flushed a dark red and turned away, his voice as he called the housekeeper strident in his anger.

Slowly, gazing into Maretta's eyes all the way, Rhian carried her up the stairs, pausing at the bend to look down into the hall. Maretta followed his gaze and found Harford watching their progress, step by agonizing step. There was more than anger in his gaze now, something she could not read, something which was meant for his son alone. But that son merely smiled back at the man below, a smile which exacerbated rather than decreased the fury on the older man's face.

Rhian set her down on the bed, lifting her feet and removing her shoes. She did not tell him to stop. Instead she revelled in the touch of him. Nor did she bother to hide her feelings.

He bent over her, his lips resting on hers, touching and lifting, touching and lifting, until she longed to pull him down and hold him there to stop them tantalizing her.

'If,' he whispered, 'I were to join you there, if I were to ask you to move over and make room for me, would the answer still be "no", as it was the last time I asked you, when I lay on my own bed and invited you to take your place beside me?'

'Miss Newell?' Mrs. Fiske spoke briskly from the door.

Rhian straightened, murmured, 'I'll repeat the question at a more appropriate time,' and went out.

At dinner, the conversation was rigidly impersonal. Father and son discussed the technicalities of recording bird song, and Rhian's knowledge of bird life was such that Maretta grew even more astonished at the way the two men were so often at odds with each other. With so much in common, how could they not find some way of reconciling their differences? What was it that rankled so deeply that their antipathy simmered all the time, only just below the surface of their relationship?

When dinner was over, Rhian left them, giving a special smile to Maretta to which she responded unreservedly. Then she asked Harford how he had passed his day at the university.

'With a moderate amount of success. The discussion was, as always, about money - about how little we would be allocated in place of the substantial amount we had asked for.' He stopped, plainly having finished with the subject, because his eyes lingered on her face and lowered to look at the rest of her. There was a gentleness in his gaze.

'I'm glad,' he murmured, 'you're wearing a dress, and for once a dress without a long skirt. Yellow, like the sun,' he nodded, 'it suits you, it always did ...' His voice trailed away, his eyes seemed to see yet not to see her.

His words puzzled her. It was the first time she had ever worn yellow. The dress had been an impulse buy in a department store. Harford had certainly never before seen her in the colour.

'Come with me into the garden, Maretta. Walk at my side.' He led her through a glass door on to the paved area. 'Let me take your hand.' They wandered over lawns, damp now with dew, passing a gardener who was still devotedly working. He straightened and saluted as they went by.

In the rose garden, breathing in the heavy perfume of the flowers, bright with colour against the evening light, Harford proposed to Maretta.

'Will you be my wife, my dearest? Will you marry me, be at my side whenever I need you? Let me give you everything you want, a beautiful home, valuable possessions, but most of all - my love?'

In her bedroom, staring at the star-studded sky, Maretta recalled the moment with a strange kind of pain.

'Give me time,' she had pleaded. 'We know so little about each other.'

If only it were your son asking me to marry him, she had thought, if only it were Rhian standing here, telling me he loved me and wanted me by his side for the rest of his life ...

Harford had shaken his head. 'I know more about you than you think. I know all about you, the way you smile, the way you frown when something displeases you, the way we share everything and laugh together, the way you look when you stand by my side as a bride.' He had stopped and closed his eyes, as if he had realized what he had said, but he had continued, 'In dreams, I've seen you like that in my dreams. I've lived with you in my dreams, held you in my arms ...'

Beyond the dreams, the reality. The words drifted now into her mind. They puzzled her again, holding a meaning she could not grasp. Harford had given her the time she had asked for, reluctantly. But he knew he would make her love him, he had told her, taking her in his arms and kissing her with tenderness^ These days what did the age gap matter? He had never been fitter in his life and they would have many years together. And children, he had said, half to himself, and children.

Now she was filled with compassion for him. He was such a fine man, a good man. If only he did not have a son, a man she had grown to love more than she had thought she could ever love a man. A man to whom she was just another girl, another conquest, who filled, in his own words, a 'biological need' in his life.

She tantalized herself with thoughts of all he had said. 'Take your love and take your leave.' He had vowed it was his maxim, his rule. That he used and sometimes even abused women. She tried to hate him, but it was no use. The love she felt for him was not to be denied. It existed, it would persist, it would never fade.

Next morning she awoke to find him at her bedside. She thought she was still dreaming of him, but when he smiled, sat on the bed and bent over her, seeking her mouth and holding it with his, she felt the hard reality of him. Soon she must tell him of his father's proposal, but the moment was too precious to spoil. In her heart she knew she could never marry the father, loving the son.

'We have a date tonight. Be ready when I return. I'll drive back as if the devil himself were at my heels.'

'Take care,' she whispered, and in answer he slipped his arms beneath her bare shoulders and kissed her again.

The day seemed a long one. In the morning Harford worked, apologizing for having to leave her alone. Marett, crept up to Rhian's study, knowing that this time he would not come back unexpectedly and find her there. She looked at the notes he had made, neat, closely written, his language concise and his style flowing. She thought of his father's notes which she had seen lying about in the laboratory. Their method of setting out their thoughts was so similar it was heartbreaking to think of the differences which held them so disastrously apart.

The view drew her again. The day was clear, but the horizon was a sharp line. Below it the sea was grey and she wondered if before long the good weather would break. In the woods she thought she could discern the canvas

walls of the hide. Harford had said that that afternoon he would take her down there and teach her how to use her camera to the best advantage.

The thought, as usual, worried her. Harford must know by now what poor material she was in his attempts to fashion her into a successful bird-watcher. In spite of that, he had proposed to her, although the woman he married would, of necessity, have to possess an enthusiasm for ornithology which came near to his own. To how many things was he blinding himself where she was concerned?

As they sat close together in the hide, he was painstaking and understanding. The major problem in photographing birds, he said, was to get near enough to snap them but not so near they were frightened away. One method was to use a telephoto lens. They were costly, but when she became more proficient - did he really expect her to do so or was he once again fooling himself about her capabilities? - he would buy her one like his own.

Taking stills of birds in flight, he told her, needed quick reactions and a keen eye, neither of which, she wanted to cry out, did she possess. 'It may be necessary,' Harford was saying, 'to take forty or fifty pictures to get one that's good.'

Even if I took a *hundred* and fifty, she thought despondently, I wouldn't get a single bird in any of my shots. She looked at her watch. Only a few hours now until Rhian's return, but she still had not told Harford that she would be dining out. She had yet to find the courage to tell him with whom she would be dining.

The moment she chose to do so, he had just taken a shot of a lapwing - or peewit as Harford explained it was also known, because of the sound it made. He was pleased because he had caught it in a particularly exciting position of aerial display.

He was busy adjusting his camera when she ventured, 'Harford? I hope you don't mind, but I won't be in for dinner this evening.' There was a brief, strained silence.

'Someone is taking you out? A woman friend staying in the area, perhaps, or one of my fellow ornithologists?' It was almost as if he were inventing possible companions, hoping against hope she would say 'yes', putting off the evil moment when he would be told the truth - a truth he must have known the moment she had mentioned the subject.

She shook her head, took a breath and said in a rush, 'Rhian is taking me.'

'I see.' She glanced at him covertly and saw his grim expression. 'You thought it wise to accept the invitation?'

'Wise?' She was puzzled.

'I've warned you against my son, Maretta. How unscrupulous he is in his dealings with women.'

'But he's - he's only invited me out to dinner.' There was another painful silence. 'You - you don't mind, Harford?'

'He's my son,' came the quiet answer. 'I have to trust him - in some things.'

'I'm sorry,' she said simply, but since there was no response? she assumed miserably that he had not accepted the apology.

Maretta was ready when Rhian returned. The sound of the car braking to a screeching stop told her of the rushed journey behind him, the hurry to keep his appointment with her. Dared she draw any hope from these signs? But what hope? she argued. Hope that her feelings for him would be returned? Must she be so naive, hadn't she received enough warnings, not only from his father but from Rhian himself? 'No wife and family figure in my future,' he had told her. 'No ties of kids and home, no obstacles to my freedom.'

Nevertheless she could not stop her pulses racing, nor her eyes from glittering with the thought of the shared hours to come. Her flame-coloured dress did not hide the fairness of her throat nor the smoothness of her back. It was shaped to the slimness of Ker waist and revealed the rounded figure beneath. Across her shoulders she wore the stole Rhian had given her.

His eyes admired, his hands found her waist. 'You look both alluring and fragile, a dangerous combination. The one I can never resist, the other I regard - always did even as a small boy - as a challenge. It makes me want to lift my hand and hurl the object to the ground. Fragility dares me to destroy it. So beware, Maretta.'

He bent his head and his mouth met hers. The kiss was little more than a touching of the lips, but it was enough to set her body throbbing.

They dined at an inn with heavy wooden beams and shining brasses on the walls. There was candlelight and crisp white tablecloths and a variety of dishes to choose from.

There were ancient prints displayed around the room and the polished floorboards creaked with age as quick-footed waiters trod them continuously. The atmosphere of the past had been preserved by clever restoration. Rhian, in his fawn-coloured suit and dark shirt, his light brown hair gleaming in the flickering light, might have been the lord of the manor and she, Maretta, her hair too a shining brown, his lady.

A hand waved back and forth in front of her eyes and she returned to the present with a smile. 'Dreaming of the future?' he asked.

The future? Even she, with Harford's proposal on her mind, did not know where that lay. 'No,' she replied, 'the past. I was telling myself a story of two hundred years ago.'

He made a face. 'Now there I can't follow you. I'm strictly modern, the epitome of the man of today. In outlook, behaviour—'

'And morals?' Her smile challenged him.

'And morals.' Her smile faded.

She smiled again, but it was strained. 'A geologist and yet a man of the present - that's a contradiction, an impossible combination, surely?'

He laughed. 'I give you that point. Maybe it's a rationalization. In my work I go back hundreds, even thousands of millions of years. In my relaxation I stay strictly in the present, enjoying every minute,' his gaze across the candlelight taunted, 'every second.'

They talked softly as the meal progressed and Rhian's charm transformed him into a man she felt she had not met before. Where was his 'rough, tough image' now?

'I must show you around,' he was saying. 'Have you ever seen the Norfolk Broads? My father and I have a boat there, it's powered and has a couple of berths. There are cooking facilities, even a minute but effective shower. Everything you need for - almost - back-to-nature living.'

'Do you take your holidays in it?'

'A few days now and then. We never go together.'

Maretta wondered if he ever took his girl-friend with him.

'My father uses it for his bird-watching activities. The area's an ornithologist's delight. I just go to get away from it all. I'll take you to see it some time.'

When? she wondered hopelessly. Her days at Horizon Hall were numbered. Some time soon Harford would demand an answer to his proposal of marriage. That answer would be 'no' and then she must leave the place. Which meant, her heart cried out, that she would never see this man again.

A number of times that evening she had tried to find sufficient courage to tell him that his father had asked her to marry Mm, but the words had caught in her throat. Once he knew, his attitude towards her would undergo a catastrophic change. His charm would switch off like a light turned out, and in its place would come flooding back the cynicism and mockery and abrasive manner which, loving him now as she did, she could not bear. I need never tell him, she told herself defensively. I shall refuse Harford's offer, so Rhian need not know it had ever been made.

After coffee in the lounge, Rhian took her by the hand. 'The hotel has a garden behind it full of roses and overhanging trees. Come with me in the moonlight and see it.'

It was almost dark and the air was heavy with the scents of the dying day. The hotel was floodlit, showing up the half-timbered walls and diamond-patterned windows. There was a fountain and, hand-in-hand, they wandered round it. Marett drew the stole closer as the spray touched her skin.

In an alcove there was a bench seat. It seemed to be made for lovers and Rhian led her to it, his arm pulling her close. Marett, glancing at him, noticed that the moonlight whitened his face into a ghostly colour. It was almost as if he were already part of her past, gone out of reach, insubstantial and shadowy. He looked down at her upturned face and smiled. She returned the smile at once. No ghost could warm her heart in such a way. The man was real, his body strong, his muscles powerful. She could feel them at his waist as her hand rested there under his jacket.

He turned when she was least expecting it and pushed her down, making a pillow of his arm so that she could rest her head upon it. With his other hand he caressed her and when she tried to say, 'No, no', his mouth found hers and stopped her protests. It was no use resisting. She hadn't the strength, nor did she want to.

He withdrew his arm from under her head, slipping it round her and moulding her to him. She yielded and clung and kissed him as she had never before kissed a man. His fingers sought and found the ends of the stole and he pulled them, crossing them over. 'Say you love me,' he whispered fiercely, 'say you love me or I'll—'

He tugged the ends around her throat, making her afraid, yet it was a fear she delighted in. He had her at his mercy and she responded unreservedly to the ecstasy he was arousing.

'I love you,' she whispered, 'I love you, Rhian.'

His head lifted and in the moonlight she could see the triumph lighting his eyes. He had won, his exultant expression said, but what had he won? At that moment, she did not care. 'Now I'll kiss you,' he murmured against her ear, 'and caress you, but later - later...'

When they arrived, Harford was in the hall. They were holding hands when Rhian led Maretta through the door, coming to a stop in front of his father.

Maretta thought inconsequentially, if two centuries had slipped away, there might have been the action of throwing down the gauntlet, of a challenge to a duel. But this was father and son. Her mind reared in fright at the idea of two such men fighting to the death. She returned to the present and knew that this was indeed a confrontation. The air was electric and it was imperative that she should escape.

'Thank you, Rhian,' she turned towards him, 'for a fabulous meal and - and everything. Harford, we went to a wonderful place ...'

He smiled, but with only a touch of his usual warmth. She wondered how much he had read into her flushed cheeks. 'Rhian,' she tugged at the hand he held prisoner, 'I must go up to my room. Please.'

With an old-world gesture quite out of place in so modern a man, he lifted her hand and put his lips to her wrist. She sensed that he was acting, but as he looked at her there was a warmth in his regard which was lacking in his father's.

At the window in her room, she leaned against the sill and stared out at the dark landscape. What was happening in the room below? Why hadn't she had the courage to tell Rhian of his father's proposal? Was Harford telling him now? After the lovemaking in the hotel gardens, what would Rhian think of her when he knew that his father wanted to marry her? Yet she had not only tolerated, but welcomed and encouraged his kisses and caresses!

Restlessly she paced the room, combed her hair, repaired her make-up, pulled the stole around her shoulders as if it might give her an extra layer of

protection. Then she went downstairs. Before she had reached the last step, she heard the violent quarrel. The colour drained from her cheeks, her legs felt weak and she clutched the banister for support.

The words she listened to - their voices were raised to such an extent it was impossible not to hear - raced round and round in her head.

'I asked her to marry me. She said she wanted time. She didn't refuse. It was only time she wanted, to make up her mind ...'

Harford's voice died away to a whisper, then loudly, angrily, he said, 'You've done it deliberately, you made her fall in love with you to spite me. You used your charm, every weapon at your disposal - and you have so many, so very many - to tear her from me. You've left me destitute. It was despicable, contemptible ...'

Now the son replied, his voice steady and hard. 'You're so right. I deny nothing. I admit I did it deliberately. I did everything within my power to make her love me. I could see what was happening to you - from the start I've known. Somehow I had to prevent the catastrophe, because that's what it would be if you married her. You're in a dream world, a world of your own making. I had to do something to make you see sense, to make you see her as she really is and not as you imagine her to be. I had to bring home to you the absurdity of the whole affair, the disaster that would come your way if you persisted in your stupidity. Well, I've got my way. Tonight she admitted that she loved me, both by word and deed. You've lost, Father, and I've won. There's nothing you can do now to alter the situation. Reconcile yourself to the fact and live the rest of your life in solitude, sanity and peace.'

'No!'

They turned and it was as if a ghost was at the door, her face was so white. She felt as if she had died and had risen again to haunt and torment them. Except that it was she herself who was in torment. The words Rhian had spoken echoed back and forth in her head as if it were an empty vault.

I did everything in my power to make her love me ... I admit I did it deliberately ... Tonight, by word and deed, she admitted that she loved me...

'Maretta!' It was Harford, coming towards her.

'Harford?' Her voice was like the whisper of a breeze. 'Do you still want to marry me?'

'Oh, my dear!' He was pale now, with a growing joy.

Rhian rasped, 'You told me you loved me. You admitted it when I challenged you.'

No one, she thought, would ever know the pain it caused her to answer him. 'Yes, I admitted it,' she responded bitterly, 'but under duress.' She lifted the ends of the stole and crossed them over her throat as he had done. 'Remember this?' She swung from him, away from his face full of contempt and - hatred? Yes, she told herself despairingly, hatred.

'Harford,' she said again, 'will you - will you still have me as your wife?'

'My sweet, sweet girl! You know what you're saying? You're so pale—'

'I'll marry you, Harford.' Her voice was toneless, her eyes staring as if she were sleepwalking.

His arms came round her, reverently, tenderly. He pulled her to him and kissed her as if she were fragile and in danger of breaking. Fragile, Rhian had said, hours - or was it years? - ago. Fragility challenged him, he said, to shatter the object, to crush it to pieces. He had broken her, and kicked the pieces aside. As Harford kissed her, the stole Rhian had given her fell from her shoulders.

He strode across the room, picked it up and pushed it into his pocket. Maretta drew away from Harford's embrace and saw Rhian's action. Her stole - he had taken the only present he had ever given her! She would not have even that now to remember him by!

The look he hurled at her made her flinch and close her eyes. She swayed and Harford caught at her. Rhian's footsteps pounded to the door and it shuddered into place behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NEXT day Harford bought Maretta an emerald and diamond engagement ring. They spent the afternoon in the hide and the evening listening to music. This, she told herself, would be the pattern of her life from now on. She must accustom herself to it. It shouldn't be difficult. She was a quiet sort of person anyway.

Harford had insisted that she should write straight away and give in her notice to the education authorities. There was no need to put off their marriage too long, and he would not have his wife working. There would be plenty of time, he told her, for her to continue her studies after they were married and gradually improve her qualifications. He did not like to see a brain as good as hers rust away in domesticity.

There had been no sight of Rhian all day. Maretta knew he had not gone away because now and then she heard his voice in the kitchen, talking to the housekeeper. She dreaded meeting him accidentally on the stairs or in the gardens, but he must have stayed in his bedroom or his study, working at his notes, and not even come out of them for his meals.

Harford told her that he had been invited to address a conference of ornithologists later that week. 'It will mean an absence of about two days,' he said. 'That, my dearest girl,' he had kissed her cheek, 'will be a long time away from you.'

Two days without him, two days without a human barrier between herself and Rhian! Should she plead homesickness and tell Harford she would go home until he returned?

But the problem was solved for her. That evening there was a phone call from her mother. 'Darling,' Josephine said, 'how are you getting on? Are you becoming a dedicated bird-watcher, like Professor Tudor? I've got some leave due from my job and I've been thinking of taking the professor up on his invitation to come and stay there.'

Now was her chance to tell her mother of her engagement.

For some reason she had been putting it off. It all seemed to be in her mind, it still did not seem a reality, even with the engagement ring on her finger, that before many weeks had passed she was to become Harford Tudor's wife.

'Mother, I - I have some news. I'm - I'm engaged, I'm going to be married.'

'Darling! Who's the lucky man? Do tell me! Professor Tudor's son?'

Maretta held her breath until she could be sure of speaking steadily. 'No, no, of course not. He's not the type to marry any woman. Harford, the professor himself.' There was a small sound from the other end. 'He - he asked me to marry him and I said yes. Aren't you - aren't you pleased?'

'But, Maretta,' she could almost hear her mother's frown, 'he's so much older. Are you doing the right thing?'

Near to tears at her mother's lukewarm reception of the news, she blurted out, 'Of *course* it's the right thing! I'm old enough to know my own mind, aren't I?'

'Don't get upset, Maretta dear. If it's what you want, I'm very happy for you. Now I really must take up your dear professor's invitation. After all, if he's to be my son-in-law ...' The voice tailed off, the words seeming to surprise her even as she said them.

Harford had joined Maretta in the hall and took the phone from her with a warm smile. 'Mrs. Newell? You've heard- your daughter's news? She's made me a very happy man. Yes, we should be delighted to have you here.'

So it was arranged that Josephine should arrive next day for a holiday at Horizon Hall. To Maretta's surprise, it was Rhian who went to the station to meet her. She heard him talking to his father and as usual, went out of her way to avoid him, so she did not hear the conversation.

When Harford told her his son had offered to pick up her mother and bring her back to save him the trouble, she tried not to look surprised. But surprised she was at such an uncharacteristically thoughtful gesture, as she

thought of it in her soured state of mind. Rhian was never thoughtful, she told herself, without a reason, without a promise of reward.

When she went down the steps to the drive to welcome her mother, she had of course to come face to face with Rhian. Her eyes fell away from the coldness in his, and although he smiled at Josephine's thanks for meeting her, when he turned to look at Maretta the smile had been wiped clean away.

'Your son found me easily,' Josephine was saying to Harford. 'He said I looked so like my daughter we might be sisters. Now there's a nice compliment for a woman of my age!'

Harford laughed. 'Yes, you are like Maretta, but,' he studied her, 'more serene.'

At the first opportunity, Rhian politely but firmly took his leave of them, opting out, as it were, from the family. Now he knows I'm soon to be part of it, Maretta thought miserably, he'll probably take himself and his work as far away from Horizon Hall as he can.

Maretta showed her mother to the guest room and sat on the bed. While her mother unpacked, Maretta turned the ring on her finger, not knowing what to say.

After an uncomfortable pause, Josephine said, 'Well, darling, you're soon going to be a married woman. How does it feel?'

Maretta longed to put her arms round her mother and sob her heart out. She had done it often as a child, when her problems had seemed insoluble. With her mother's arms around her, there had always been comfort and a promise of solution, of everything coming right. Why should she not do it now, when her mother's comfort and reassurance were so solely needed?

Because^ she recognized at last, reality did indeed lie beyond the dreams, and it was that reality from which she could not escape. She had had her dream - of loving Rhian, of admitting that love to him. In the dream he had returned it. In reality he had thrown it back in her face. He was incapable of love, of lasting faithful love. Hadn't his father told her?

'How does it feel, love?' Josephine repeated her question gently.

Maretta lifted her face and her mother saw the teeth holding still the lower lip, the uncertainty in the grey eyes. She went to her daughter, sat beside her and took her hands.

'I only want your happiness, Maretta,' she said. 'You must be sure, very sure, that what you're doing is right. It would be terrible to let such a good man as the professor down. He seems so fond of you, so eager to do anything he thinks will please you and make you happy. Once you're married to him, if you ever drifted away from him, it would bruise him so badly you'd wreck his life. He'd be a broken man. You see, he's not young, he couldn't take it as a younger man could.'

'Mother, I know,' Maretta whispered. It took her a long time to say the words, but in the end she managed it. 'I'll make him a good wife. He - he may be older than I am in years, but when you—' she took a breath, 'when you love someone, age doesn't matter, does it?'

'And you love your professor, Maretta?'

Another long silence. 'I'm very, very fond of him.'

Josephine studied her daughter, then, with a sigh, rose and continued with her unpacking.

Rhian joined them for dinner. He talked to Josephine and to his father, but Maretta he ignored. She was silent for much of the time, although Harford did his best to draw her into the conversation. Now and then he would concern himself with how little she was eating and joke with her mother about how he was afraid Maretta would fade away before he had a chance to make her his wife.

Josephine laughed with him, Maretta smiled, but Rhian did not appear to have heard. He did not linger after coffee, making his excuses and going up to his study to continue with his work. He smiled at Josephine, nodded to his father, looked unsmilingly at Maretta and left them.

Maretta might have been able to disguise her dejection from her husband-to-be, who since her acceptance of his proposal of marriage had seemed a different man, but she could not hide it from her mother.

Later, when they were alone in Maretta's room, Josephine said, 'I wish I could be sure you were happy, dear. There's something wrong, I know there is. Can't you tell me?'

Maretta, who could not lie to her mother, was silent.

'I watched you during dinner,' Josephine went on, 'and your professor, too.'

'I know you did. Well, what conclusions did you come to?'

'Don't be bitter, darling. I'm just trying to get at the truth. Maretta,' she sat beside her daughter on the bed, 'Harford is sweet and kind and a wonderful man. He's fit, there's no doubt about it. He doesn't seem to suffer from the middle-aged ills which plague other men. But he's not young in his ways, Maretta. He's been a widower for so long, his world has shrunk to himself and his own enthusiasms and needs. He's not going to find it easy to adapt himself to the ways of a girl twenty-eight years younger than he is. It's you who's going to have to do the adapting, dear. No, don't turn away from me, darling. I'm only trying to get you to face the truth, to help you look into the future more than you're doing now. I'm twenty-four years older than you are. I've travelled all the distance you're going to travel, and what's more I travelled much of it with a man almost my own age.'

Maretta went to the window and stared out. 'I'm not changing my mind, Mother. I think you're seeing difficulties where none exist.' She turned. 'I - I appreciate your concern. I know you're trying to help me, but—' she shook her head, 'it's no use. I'm marrying Harford.'

Two days later, Harford went to Manchester. There was a conference of an international society of ornithologists and he had been invited to take a prominent part.

He kissed Maretta tenderly. 'If your mother were not here, I would ask you to come with me, but it's not for long, is it?'

The weather changed and the skies clouded over. The trees swayed in the strong breeze and now and then rain fell. In between showers, Maretta showed Josephine the gardens. One afternoon Rhian took them to Norwich. At the market place he left them, saying he had business elsewhere, but Maretta wondered if he had invented it in order to get away from her.

When she looked at the bright canopies over the stalls and wandered between the rows, admiring the variety of goods on display, she could not help remembering the last time she was there. They passed the stall where Maretta had seen and admired the white stole, the one which Rhian had bought her. Now his gift was back in his possession. He might even pass it on to his girl-friend.

Doranne had phoned him a number of times and their conversation had lingered on and on. Passing Rhian leaning back against the telephone table in the hall, Maretta had sometimes caught a little of the discussion. It seemed to be technical talk - after all, Doranne was a geologist as he was. But it was interspersed with the kind of jokes and laughter which only people who knew each other intimately exchanged.

On the second night of Harford's absence, there was a storm. The gale howled round the house as if it were winter, whistling through cracks and round doors. Maretta woke in the early hours, her sleep disturbed by the noise of it all. Looking out, she saw just a little of the chaos the storm was causing.

Garden chairs left out on the patio were broken to pieces. Far away it was possible to see the agony of the trees in the woods by the stream. There was a particularly powerful gust of wind - it came straight from the North Sea with few hills in between to act as a wind-break - and from the direction of the woods there came a rending sound. The hide in the woods, Maretta thought, Harford's hide - the gale must be smashing it up. It was something Harford prized, it was an indispensable part of his life. She was his fiancée, so she must go out there and do her utmost to save it.

She pulled jeans over her nightdress. Her denim jacket lay on a chair and this she snatched up and put on, zipping it shut. She pushed her feet into sandals and raced along the corridor, down the stairs and through the hall:

The kitchen door was bolted and locked, but she turned the key and slid the bolts and went out, slamming the door behind her. The gale was like a wall and she threw herself against it. Her hair flew free, across her face and into her mouth. The lawn was saturated with the rain that had fallen and the water squelched through to her bare toes.

Past the fountain which drenched her with its spray and into the woods, through the brambles which tore through the material of her jeans and left a scarlet trail on her flesh ... Yes, the hide was falling to pieces under the trees and already the roof had collapsed. The two chairs were on their sides, and a book of Harford's notes was wet and curled and lay pathetically on the earth.

As she pushed it into the pocket of her jeans, she heard footsteps pounding across the lawn and crashing through the undergrowth towards her. More frightened at that moment of the newcomer than the storm, she looked round. The expression on Rhian's face - of a fury which equalled and even surpassed that of the storm - triggered off her instinct for self-preservation and she started to run. But the wind blew strands of hair across her eyes and half blinded her. Her foot came up against a protruding root and her whole body plunged forward. In the moment that she lay winded and bruised, there came an ominous sound of cracking and splintering.

Hands tore at her, any part of her, trying to find a hold. She was taken by the ankle and by the wrist and, face-down, half lifted, half dragged across the undergrowth. Thorns and twigs scratched her face and neck and she screamed, trying to tell the man who was torturing her thus to stop. But she felt a body come down and spread itself heavily over her, as if shielding her from - what?

There was a shrieking groan and a great tree, torn by its roots, came crashing down little more than a body's length away. Some of the branches brushed across them as they went down. The gale, as if it had done its worst, seemed at that moment to lessen. But it began to rain. Slowly, the man who had

thrown himself upon her lifted himself away. Maretta continued to lie there, having no strength to move.

Rhian lay beside her on his back. His head was turned a little away from the full force of the rain. He was breathing heavily. Maretta's clothes stuck to her skin and her body was as wet as if she had plunged into the stream which had turned into a full-flowing river only a few steps away from them.

Rousing himself, Rhian sat up. 'My God,' he muttered, 'that was nearly the end of my father's precious wife-to-be! What the hell did you think you were doing coming down here in this?'

'The hide,' she muttered, 'Harford treasures it, so—'

'So,' Rhian interrupted sarcastically, 'as his dutiful fiancée you tried to save it, willing even to give your life in the effort.'

'I didn't know,' she choked, dragging herself into a sitting position, 'that a tree would come down.'

He looked around. 'Force ten, I calculate. Almost anything could happen, including trees falling like castles of cards. You're crazy, girl,' he stood, pulling her with him, 'crazy, do you hear?' His hands gripped her shoulders and he shook her until her teeth chattered. There was such brutality in his action after what she had endured that she cried out how much she hated him, how she wished he was not part of the family, how she detested him with all her heart, how she wished Harford had never had a son ...

Her words were stopped by a kiss so cruel, so savage, crashing so mercilessly through all the barriers which had until now existed in their relationship, that she thought when the kiss ended, her life, having been drained by his passion, would have ended, too.

Almost imperceptibly the nature of the kiss underwent a change. As the storm around them quietened, so the storm inside them grew. Again Rhian broke through those barriers, his hand finding her throat, moving down and encountering the nightdress which clung to her wet body and pushing it

roughly aside to mould and caress the breasts beneath. His passion blazed, this time not with anger, but with ardour and desire.

She did not even try to impose the barriers again, she did not once say 'No, you mustn't touch me like that. I'm Harford's now, not yours to fondle as you will.' The response he was arousing in her she allowed to go unchecked. She still loved him - more now, perhaps, than ever before - even if once again he might only be 'making her love him' to force her to face the truth about herself and Harford and reveal to her her own stupidity.

At last he put her away from him, but he did not let her go. He had plainly not finished with her.

'Rhian,' she whispered, straining to return the warmth of his embrace, but he held her forcibly away. His hands were under her armpits, supporting her, even denying her the luxury of sinking to the ground. She urged against him, seeking a softening in his features, some sign of a need for her which equalled her need for him, but she might have been trying to track the path of an elusive species of bird.

Her head flopped hopelessly, lifelessly, but Rhian seemed to possess not an atom of pity or compassion. His grip beneath her arms tightened and he ground out, 'Now will you leave this house and leave my father? Will you go away, out of my father's life, and leave him to his dreams?'

But she was not listening. Her head had found his shoulder because there was nowhere else for it to rest. 'You're a sadist,' she muttered, as if in a fever, 'you're a monster, you're unspeakable! I suppose you think you've given me a lesson, another lesson ... You said you'd give me one lesson after another until I left your father alone..

The rain had stopped, but her tears went on running down her cheeks. She sobbed against him, feeling the chest, like the sheer face of a mountain, beneath her cheek, the rigidity of his body against hers.

'Rhian,' she whispered again, 'Rhian ...' But his hold did not soften, the arms around her stayed tough as whipcord across her back.

There was a lightening in the sky and with the early dawn came a calming of the storm. Marettia drew away from him, rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands.

'Your occupation suits you,' she muttered. 'Your heart's so hard someone should take it from your body and examine it for fossil remains and for any evidence of past life. Because it certainly hasn't got any now.'

Fingers gripped her chin and jerked up her face. In the dawn light he could see the scratches and cuts inflicted by the brambles as he had dragged her out of the path of the falling tree. As she opened her eyes a great shiver shook her body. In her confused state she could not be sure whether it was the fact that she was wet through that had caused it, or the cool, implacable look in Rhian's eyes. His hair, like hers, was heavy with rain, his face grimed with the earth on which they had lain.

He had saved her life and she had not thanked him! Before she could speak he had lifted her into his arms and was walking away from the woods, the fallen tree and the broken hide.

'There's no need,' she protested feebly, 'I can walk.'

But he carried on, across the lawn, past the fountain and towards the house.

'Rhian?' He did not seem to have heard, nevertheless she went on, 'You saved my life. Thank you.' He did not acknowledge her thanks but walked on, holding her, she reflected tiredly, as if she were a burden he would rather shed than bear.

She had thanked him, what more could she do?

In the kitchen, he stood her on her feet and told her peremptorily to stay there. From a first aid cabinet he took cotton wool and a soothing lotion and cleaned the scratches across her forehead, along her nose and running the length of her cheeks.

'There's no need,' she muttered again, and just as ineffectually.- He continued until the cuts were cleansed to his satisfaction.

'Do you want something to drink?' he asked curtly. 'Something cold, something hot?'

She would have loved a hot drink. 'No, thank you.' She went on, incapable in her tired state of keeping her bitterness under control.

'There's no need to overdo the kindness. When Harford comes home, I'll tell him what a thoughtful son he's got and how he was even willing to sacrifice his own life in order to save his father's future bride from the disastrous consequences of her own stupidity.'

She saw the tightening of his lips, the storm-fury that invaded his eyes and she put up her arms to hide her head, cowering away from him.

He came towards her slowly. 'I'm a sadist, a monster - your own words, remember? I haven't forgotten. I doubt if I ever will. You might be right, however. So get yourself out of here, out of my sight and into your own room, with the door locked between us, or I won't hold myself responsible for what I might do to you.'

It was not until Maretta reached the safety of her bedroom, with her heart pounding, and her breath labouring in her lungs, that the shaking began. And there was not a single pair of arms, not even granite-hard ones, to offer her warmth and comfort.

With the morning came the need for explanations. Josephine paled at the sight of her daughter's injured face. What had happened? she demanded to know, so Maretta told her.

When Rhian joined them for breakfast, Josephine thanked him for what he had done. He smiled at her warmly - leaving Maretta's heart even more chilled - and said it was a pity her daughter had not inherited her mother's common sense.

Maretta's eyes blazed into his sardonic ones, but he merely smiled at her, too, although in a very different way. There was intimacy in it, as if he were

remembering his lovemaking in the soaking dawn. There was mockery, too, as if he found her scratched face amusing, and she coloured and tried to hide her face with the palms of her hands.

When Harford came home that afternoon, there were more explanations, and he thanked her with deep sincerity for going to the rescue of his beloved hide.

Rhian, who was there to greet his father, said, 'You should be honest with her, Father. Tell her that its loss wouldn't have been catastrophic. It's not difficult to make a hide with the right materials and knowledge. In fact, most of the stuff from the old hide can be used again. I've had a look. It won't take long to put it together.'

Maretta turned on him. 'What you're trying to say, I suppose, is that all my efforts to save it were wasted and that I was an even bigger fool than you've so far made me out to be.'

Rhian had angered his father, too. 'What does the material side of it matter?' he said sharply. 'I'm touched that she should think of me - of the things I treasure - in such circumstances, and want to rush out even in a storm to protect them. But you, with your lack of sentiment and concern for others, wouldn't know anything about that.'

Josephine, stupefied by the antagonism between father and son, stared from one to the other. Maretta, hardened to it, gazed at the floor, feeling the security of Harford's arm about her. Rhian's expression hardened, the muscles in his face jerking as he compressed his teeth inside his mouth. He gave his father a deep, sarcastic bow. 'Thank you for your gratitude. I not only saved your future wife from almost certain death, but I nearly lost my own in the process.'

Josephine sat down as though her legs would no longer support her. Harford stared at the door which had closed behind his son. Maretta, feeling Rhian's bitterness and pain as her own, jerked from Harford's hold and raced across the room, tearing open the door and closing it after her.

Rhian was half-way up the stairs. Maretta ran after him a few steps and he turned and stared down at her. How could she make amends? How could she heal what his father had injured?

'Rhian,' she whispered, 'I'm - I'm sorry—'

His face stayed implacable, unreadable as his eyes, narrow, piercing, roamed over his face. 'You're sorry, are you?' So he was not sparing her. 'For what? For me, for my father - or for yourself?'

He turned his back and continued on his way.

Maretta spent the morning with Harford in the hide. Harford had rebuilt it. As Rhian had prophesied, it had not taken long to construct another, partly from the undamaged sections of the old hide and partly with new materials. This time the finished product was larger, in order to accommodate, Harford had fondly said, a lady by his side.

At Coffee-time, to Maretta's surprise, her mother joined them. It was she and not Mrs. Fiske who carried the coffee and biscuits on a tray. Under her arm was a canvas chair, and she promised Harford she would sit quiet as a mouse while he watched the birds and identified their plumage and their song.

Harford was delighted to be called upon, as he put it, to entertain two lovely, intelligent ladies in his hide. When he saw that Josephine's interest was genuine, he said he would lend her books on the subject, too. Maretta, a little puzzled, glanced at her mother who, at Harford's invitation, was at that moment putting an eye to Harford's telescope to try to identify a pied wagtail.

'Black and white plumage,' Harford was saying, 'long tail which it sometimes wags up and down.'

'I've got it!' Josephine exclaimed. 'I've found it first time!'

Harford was as delighted as she was. 'You're quicker than your daughter,' he commented. 'It takes her a little longer than it takes you to get on the track of a bird. Although,' with a warm smile at Maretta, as if to soften any criticism she might read into his words, 'she usually gets there in the end. And she does try very hard.'

Maretta felt a little like a student who had been reprimanded for bad examination results. Harford, sensing her hurt feelings, put his arm round her and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. 'One of these days,' he said, 'under my tuition, she'll be as expert as I am.'

'She always was a little slow at spotting things,' Josephine was saying, idly moving the telescope around the scene outside. 'Even the obvious seems to pass her by, although it might be staring her in the face.'

'Mother!' Maretta cried, scandalized at her mother's sudden and uncharacteristic disloyalty.

'You mean,' said Harford, laughing, 'that even if a bird as identifiable as, say, an owl were to sit on a branch in front of her for ten minutes, she still wouldn't see him!'

Now they were both laughing at her expense and, discomfited, she shifted away from Harford.

'We've upset her, Josephine,' Harford said. 'My sweet Maretta, you mustn't take offence so easily. We meant no harm. I think you have great potential as a budding ornithologist. You have enthusiasm, which is half the battle.'

It was shortly before dinner that Maretta, gazing out of the landing window on her way down to the dining-room, saw in the drive a small blue car. There was, somehow, a feminine look about the vehicle, and it took her only a few moments to guess the identity of the owner. When she heard the sound of laughter coming from along the corridor behind her, she knew, with a sinking heart, that her guess had been right. Doranne Forester was here and at that moment she was being entertained by Rhian in his room.

Maretta was swamped by a surge of jealousy such as she had never known before, and when there was the sound of a door opening and a woman's voice raised excitedly in answer to a man's, she ran the rest of the way to the stairs and raced down to the hall below. By this time, Rhian and his lady friend had reached the top of the staircase.

As Maretta gazed up, so Doranne gazed down. Each woman sized the other up and it was then that Maretta felt the disadvantage of her position. She was literally being looked down upon by the woman who, deep inside, she knew to be her most hated rival.

The girl Maretta had met briefly in Norwich marketplace was a very different person from the one standing so superciliously at the top of the stairs, her hand resting possessively on Rhian's arm.- Her red hair had been brushed until it glowed, her dress was black with flecks of red interwoven into it and the shape inside the dress could not possibly be dismissed as of no interest to a male eye. The low- cut neckline was enhanced by a long white necklace which had been twined many times round her throat. In her hand was a cigarette which she now lifted to her mouth and inhaled upon, considering Maretta over the smoke which she breathed out.

Rhian lounged against the banister watching the two women. He seemed to be amused by what he saw. He, too, looked down on Maretta, smiling cynically, looking her over in such a sardonic way that she felt reduced once again to the status of the 'little lab assistant' which he so contemptuously called her and from which his father had, by placing his ring on her finger, elevated her.

Maretta frowned, looking down at herself. Was there something wrong with her dress? Did he not like its gold colour, the way it left her throat and back bare, and then followed lovingly the shapeliness of her outline? She, too, had brushed her hair until it shone. Admittedly, it was not the burnished gold of Doranne's but its colour, so like Rhian's, had an attraction all its own. Now it fell from a centre parting to her shoulders, framing her oval face and emphasizing the soft appeal in her grey eyes. So what was there about her to bring such a taunting smile to Rhian's face?

Since no one made any attempt at an introduction, Maretta turned away and made for the drawing-room, only to realize, when she had found a seat, that she was, in effect, through being Harford's fiancée, the hostess. She should have made the first approach and should not have waited for Rhian to bring Doranne and herself together.

When the other two appeared, it was Doranne who took the initiative. She crossed the room, her hand extended. Maretta rose and took it, smiling faintly. 'We've met before,' Doranne said, 'in surroundings much less elegant than this.' She looked at Maretta's ring. 'I understand I must congratulate you on your engagement to Professor Tudor. I hope you'll be very happy. There's certainly no doubt that whatever else may be missing, you won't be lacking in life's comforts.'

Her smile was brief and insincere and Maretta flushed at the meaning she detected beneath Doranne's words. She was, in Doranne Forester's view, marrying Harford Tudor for nothing more than his possessions and his money.

'Whoever marries Rhian,' her glance at him over her shoulder was warm, 'won't be doing it for the stately home and the luxuries his father can provide.' She turned to Rhian. 'You're a rolling stone, aren't you, darling? Nothing to your name except the letters after it, no worldly goods, not a tie, not a care in the world.'

Maretta wondered if there was a note of bitterness in Doranne's voice. Had she, too, failed to hook this man on her very long line, in spite of the succulent bait - her looks, her figure, her brains - on the end of it?

'A born nomad,' Rhian replied, smiling and pouring drinks, 'roaming through jungles and across deserts, leaving behind nothing but my footprints in the sand.' He placed a drink in Maretta's hand, standing in front of her and blocking her view of his guest. 'Without a woman tagging behind, hanging on to my jacket and telling me how much she needs me and never letting go.' With a half smile, he watched the colour leave Maretta's cheeks, but she rallied and threw back at him,

'No woman with even the smallest grain of sense would want to tag along behind any man, certainly not one as irresponsible and self-centred as you.'

Doranne laughed, throwing back her head. 'It's delightful to see how well, Miss Newell, you're going to get on with your future stepson!'

Maretta stared up at Rhian as the words registered in her mind. Stepson? Her hand shook so much that Rhian took the glass away from her. By his smile, goading and tormenting, it seemed that *he* had thought of the coming situation long ago. Why, then, had it never occurred to her before what their relationship would be?

CHAPTER NINE

AFTER dinner, Maretta was the odd one out. Next to Harford on the settee, her mother sat with a book open on her lap, exclaiming at the beautiful plumage of the birds pictured on every page.

Maretta knew her mother had a photographic memory. If Harford, at the end of the evening, were to turn to the beginning of the book, cover the names and ask her mother to identify the birds to which he was pointing, she would be able to do so with ease.

Rhian's chair and Doranne's were pulled close to each other and the subject of their conversation was - reasonably enough, Maretta supposed - geology. Now and then she would catch Rhian's eyes on her as she listlessly turned the pages of the magazine Harford had given her. It specialized in articles on the countryside and contained one that he himself had contributed on the bird population of East Anglia. She had dutifully read it, but it meant very little to her.

Sighing, she lifted her head and watched the couple on the settee. Her mother was making great strides in her relationship with her future son-in-law. No doubt she was putting herself out, Maretta thought a little sourly, to ensure that after her daughter's marriage they would all be one big, happy family - nomad son included. Her mother had even been surprisingly pleasant to that son's girl-friend. Did she think, quite misguidedly, that Rhian was sitting next to his future wife?

It occurred to her how much Harford had changed in the weeks she had spent at his house. Gone was the rather fusty professor-type image, the frayed cuffs, the old-fashioned clothes. He had changed outwardly so much that he was hardly recognizable as the man who used to haunt the laboratory, roaming absentmindedly between benches and standing at her side to give a word of advice, or just watching what she was doing.

His clothes were up-to-date, but carefully so. He had not tried to emulate his son's panache, his executive nearness on formal occasions or more often a careless disregard for how he looked. Harford's jacket had a turn-over collar,

pockets above and below the waist, a wide belt. His shirt was checked, his tie bright against the grey-green of his jacket and trousers.

And yet her mother had alleged that he was not young in his ways. In his mind and habits, she asserted, he was unquestionably middle-aged. Had he not, then, changed inwardly as drastically as he had changed outwardly?' Maretta, who knew him better, was sure he had. He smiled more readily, his manner was easier, his movements more relaxed.

Once he would never have dreamed of patting the cushion beside him as he was doing now, and inviting her to join her mother and himself on the settee. He had looked up, seen her sitting disconsolately outside the family circle - which was ironic, she thought, since she was soon to become part of it - and with a movement of his hand, persuaded her to sit beside him.

Now his arm was round her waist and his face turned to rub against her hair. She felt a swift kiss implanted on her head and she turned, eyes bright, to smile at him. It was good, she thought, to feel wanted again. It was good, too, to see Harford's son looking at them disparagingly and - surely? - uncomfortably. Did he not like such a show of affection in front of his lady friend? As for Doranne, she looked amused.

Josephine, on the other hand, had not seemed to notice, and went on talking about the rare birds pictured on the pages of the book, drawing Harford's mind away from her daughter and doing it with skill. Maretta did not care very much. "No one could draw Harford's arm from around her, take away the security that represented. No one could remove his ring from her finger, not even the savage efforts of his son, whose unrelenting determination to make her break off her engagement to his father had almost broken her heart - but not her resistance.

Never again, she told herself, settling more comfortably against Hartford, would she succumb to Rhian's charm.

Every time she had done so, she had suffered humiliation at his hands. She was, she told herself - resting her head on Harford's shoulder - immune now to- Harford's son. Nothing he could do could hurt her any more.

Rhian rose, went to the record player and put on a record. The music was for dancing. The volume was quiet enough to allow people to converse but sufficiently loud for a couple to hear its rhythm and its melody. He held out his arms to Doranne, who slipped into them easily, as if she knew every inch of the way, and with their bodies touching, they moved slowly round the room.

Now and then Rhian looked down into Doranne's upturned face. They were speaking softly and their conversation must at times have been amusing, because occasionally Rhian would laugh. Maretta drew closer to Harford. Nothing, she repeated to herself fiercely, that Rhian could do would hurt her any more. The music ended and began again and they danced on.

Harford was asking Josephine if she knew how the Norfolk Broads were formed. 'Once,' he told her, 'they were considered to be natural lakes, but the Broads are, in fact, the flooded sites of ancient peat diggings. Amazing,' he went on, 'to think that there were once enough people in East Anglia to merit the taking of such tremendous amounts of peat.' Josephine seemed very impressed. Encouraged, Harford continued, 'During the centuries 900-1300 the large number of Danish and Anglo-Saxon inhabitants made the area into one of the most highly populated in England.'

Josephine smothered a yawn and Harford said immediately, 'Do tell me if I'm boring you.'

'Of course you're not,' Josephine replied. 'I think it's just that,' she smiled up at him sweetly, 'I'm a little thirsty.'

At once Harford was the perfect host and on his feet, offering her a drink.

'Coffee?' she asked. 'I'd love a cup, if that's possible.'

'Certainly. Mrs. Fiske,' he went to the door, 'I'll see Mrs. Fiske.'

The gap between mother and daughter seemed wide and unbridgeable. Maretta made no effort to move nearer to her mother, nor did Josephine invite her to do so. Maretta felt a little hurt. What was the matter with her mother?'

But the next moment, all thoughts of her parent were wiped out of her mind. Rhian was standing in front of her, his hand moving towards her wrist. With an action which was almost frightened - she wanted no more physical contact with Rhian Tudor - she evaded him, but he caught his prey in mid-air, like a man with a rifle shooting down a terrified bird, and pulled her to her feet.

'That's right, Miss Newell,' Doranne's voice was hard and caustic, 'indulge Rhian in his constant seeking for a change of female scenery. One woman too near to him for too long bores him to death. He's told me so more than once. If he ever marries - and heaven help the woman who becomes his wife - he'll stick beside her for as long as it suits him, then he'll up and off in search of faces, and pastures, new.'

'Yes,' said Rhian maliciously, pulling Maretta as close to him as Doranne had been, 'while the last kiss of the honeymoon is still wet on my lips, I'll be gone.' He laughed into Maretta's stormy face and tightened his hold.

'I don't *want* to dance with you,' she muttered, under cover of the music. 'You never even asked if I did.'

'Never a policy of mine to ask,' he replied blandly. 'I simply take - then wait for the gratitude in the form of loving arms winding round my neck.'

'You're - you're barbaric,' she flung at him, 'you're inhuman, you're callous!'

'I've heard all that before.'

'All right, but now you know what I think of you, will you let me go?'

'No. Anyway, I've known for a long time what you think of me.'

'Your father's coming back.'

'Now tell me something I don't know.'

She tried to tear away from him. 'Will you let me go!'

'No.'

She glanced anxiously over her shoulder. Harford looked most displeased, but resumed his seat beside Josephine. 'The coffee is coming,' he told her, at which Josephine expressed her pleasure, and gazed again at the book on her lap. 'It will be beyond my wildest dreams,' Harford said, 'to have in my family two people, not just one, interested in the subject dearest to my heart. When Maretta and I are married, Josephine, you must come and stay with us often, then we could all three go out bird-watching.'

'What,' whispered the professor's son, 'no cosy little twosomes? Always a case of "and mother came, too"?''

'If you don't let me go,' Maretta said, her body keeping in perfect time with his, but her mind going almost berserk with his nearness, 'I'll scratch your eyes out!'

'Oh,' he slowed down, smiling derisively, 'if you did that, I wouldn't be able to look at you any more and enjoy your bewitching beauty. So I had better do what you want.' He followed up his sarcasm with a deep, mocking bow and returned to Doranne, who slipped her arm through his and held him as if she would never let him go.

Unexpectedly, Harford was called back to the university. He asked Maretta if she would like to accompany him this time, but she shrank from the idea. Somehow the thought of returning to her place of work, not as a laboratory assistant but as the fiancée of the head of the department himself, instead of intriguing her, filled her with an intense shyness.

There would be introductions to the highly-placed academics with whom Harford worked, to education officials and advisers, and she did not feel ready to meet them on equal terms with her husband-to-be. Deep down she still had not completely accepted the fact that she was engaged to be married to the man who, only a few weeks before, she had regarded with such awe.

Perhaps, she thought, it was the fact that, apart from kissing her now and then and putting a protective arm around her, he did nothing to place their relationship on a more intimate footing. He seemed quite content to wait until the wedding ring was on her finger.

Next morning Harford went off down the drive, lifting a hand in farewell. He would not stay overnight, he had told Maretta as they had kissed good-bye on the doorstep, even if it meant arriving home in the early hours. He would allow nothing, he had said, to keep him away for a prolonged period from the girl of his dreams.

Josephine, standing a little apart, watched them with a smile. Was she, Maretta wondered, waiting until Harford's car had disappeared round the bend in the drive, becoming reconciled to the marriage at last? She certainly seemed to approve of Harford as a prospective son-in-law.

Later that morning, Maretta was in her room trying on a long-sleeved scarlet blouse of her mother's when there was a knock on the door. Thinking it was her mother, she invited the caller in. It was Rhian, and she reacted immediately to his presence.

'No, no, you can't come in. I thought it was—'

'My father?' Eyebrows rose, the smile turned mocking. 'Whom, no doubt, you would have welcomed, literally, with open arms. After all, he is your fiance.'

She coloured slightly. 'Don't be silly. He's gone away. All the same, I'm trying something on, so—'

'Go ahead. The sight of a woman in the process of changing from one garment to another doesn't embarrass me, I assure you.'

'You've seen so many?' Why did she have to sound so angry?

Rhian laughed, leaning back against the door. 'So many that even if I had three hands, I still couldn't count them on all my fingers.'

She resigned herself to his presence and to wearing her mother's blouse, which was too big for her anyway, until he had gone. 'What do you want?'

'First, to give you this.' He took from his pocket the stole he had bought her in Norwich market, and held it out. It was as much as Maretta could do not to snatch it from him.

She eyed it longingly. 'Suppose I don't want it any more?'

'Stop playing with me, sweetheart, or you'll get more than you've bargained for.'

A dark red blush crept up her cheeks at the endearment, spoken in a slightly insulting way.

'Or shall I wind it round your neck again, as I did on a certain - rather special - occasion?'

Rather special? The evening she had admitted she loved him? Special for him, of course, because it was another conquest to chalk up, another woman at his feet just waiting for him to trample all over her.

She held out her hand for it, but he stayed where he was. 'Come and get it.'

To her own humiliation, that was exactly what she did. He smiled, obviously gratified that she had obeyed his order. Taking the stole, Maretta retreated to a safe distance, pressing the softness of the fabric against her cheek.

'Why have you returned this?'

He gave a dismissive shrug. 'A whim, an impulse.' He paused. 'As a peace offering. It's time we came to some sort of understanding, considering it's not going to be long before you become a member of the Tudor family.'

'Peace offering?' She looked doubtful. Would there ever be peace between them? 'Wouldn't it be better to call it a truce, a cease-fire, a rest from hostilities?'

'All right, truce then. I'm easy.' He looked at his watch. 'Get ready, because we're going out.'

'Out? Where?'

'Remember that boat I told you my father and I owned on the Broads? The weather's right, the paternal bird has flown for the day, what better time than this to take you to see it?'

'But that would leave my mother here alone.'

'I've settled that to her satisfaction. We're giving her a lift to Norwich. She's going to sight-see and window-shop.'

Maretta stroked her stole. 'Doranne?'

'Gone.' Maretta looked up quickly. 'Taken herself off. Removed herself from the premises. And me.'

'But why? I thought you two were—' She could not put the idea into words because it hurt too much. His reply was even more painful.

'I discovered after all that she had marriage in mind. I didn't. That's the worst of women.' He smiled and rested an elbow on the top of the dressing-table mirror. 'A few kisses, a few caresses and they see a marriage certificate floating about in front of their eyes.' 'You really are despicable.' She said it in a matter-of-fact way and he laughed loudly.

'My job has taken me to lonely places, into the unadulterated company of men. I'm not suited for a monastic life, so when I go on leave I adjust the balance.'

'As you've said before.' She draped the white stole round her neck but removed it because it looked wrong against the scarlet of the blouse.

'It therefore follows,' his amused gaze watched her carefully as she looked at her reflection, 'that I'm conditioned to women who don't complain when you

up and leave them, make no emotional demands and accept that they might never see you again.'

Her reflected image showed her by the expression on her face just how much his words were hurting her. 'As you said, "Take your love and take your leave."'

'Right.'

She swung round. 'I didn't realize until now just how much I hate you.'

There was a long, brittle silence. Their gaze held, but however much she tried, she could read nothing into his expression. 'I'll give you ten minutes,' he said, and went from the room.

They drove through villages with imposing churches and sprawling village greens. There were ancient cottages with tiled roofs and pink-washed walls. Others had roofs of thatch and were half-timbered, the walls being painted in dazzling white. Some old houses had sharp-pointed gables and roofs curved with the weight of passing centuries.

They lunched at an ancient inn which dated from the fifteenth century and as they drove on, making for the river, Rhian told Marettta about the large number of windmills to be seen on the Norfolk Broads. They were, he told her, built during the seventeenth century to assist with the draining and reclaiming of the land. Many of them, he said, fell into disuse and disrepair with the coming of electricity and more efficient methods of doing the work of the windmills. But some had been well looked after and preserved.

'Where's the boat moored?' she asked him.

'Near Horning. It's free there, but other moorings are not. When you're going to stay on the boat for some days, it's usual to go on a shopping spree before you start in order to stock up for the journey. There are quite a number of shops you can call on along the Broads. Since we're not intending to stay,' he gave her a quick smile, 'there's no need for us to visit them.'

It was a small two-berth motor cruiser that Rhian, his hand extended for hers, led her on to. He took her on a swift tour round the craft.

'Galley,' he said, pointing to a semi-partitioned area with cooking facilities and other kitchen equipment. 'Lockers, shower and so on.' He walked on. 'Settee berth, for sleeping on at night and seating by day. Across the gangway, another berth, similarly used. All the modern conveniences you could wish for. Fine for a honeymoon, wouldn't you say?' With a quizzical smile, 'Is this where my father will bring you, do you think?'

She turned and walked towards the galley. The thought disturbed her oddly. Alone with Harford, day - and night? How immature can I get? she reproached herself.

'Well, what do you think of it?'

'It's fantastic. Are we staying anchored here all day or are we going places?'

'We're going places.' He got the engine started with ease and leapt on to the promenade to release the boat from its moorings. Then he dropped back on board, revved the engine and steered it into midstream, slowly, carefully avoiding the mass of other craft around them.

There were sailing boats, their sails billowing in the breeze, rowing boats, dinghies and large motor cruisers. At last they were under way, Rhian at the wheel. Marett looked bemusedly around her. There were houses standing at the water's edge, with 'garages' into which the house owners steered their boats on their return from a day's outing. There were general stores here and there, with people in holiday mood stocking up for their journeys.

There were hotels with gardens stretching down to the river, and striped umbrellas over tables where people sat and gazed around. Now and then the wash from a larger cruiser passing them caused the boat to rock, but Rhian steered the craft expertly. He had removed his jacket and the sleeves of his open-necked shirt were rolled up.

Marett saw the powerful muscles in his arms, the broad shoulders, the controlled tension in his features as he manoeuvred the craft along the

waterway. It was lunchtime now and she wondered if he had forgotten. Ten minutes later the rhythm of the boat slowed a little and Rhian turned to Marettta, seeing her hair streaming out behind her, a look of pure pleasure on her face.

'No need to ask if you're enjoying it,' he said. 'Not even feeling pangs of hunger?'

'Well, as a matter of fact,' she replied, 'I was wondering-'

'All provided for. Take the wheel.'

She shrank away. 'No, no, I couldn't—'

'Can you drive a car?' She nodded. 'Then you can drive this. Do you know that if you hire a boat, someone gives you half an hour's instruction, then goes off and leaves you to it? So come on, take over while I find the food.'

Marettta made her way towards the wheel and put out her hands towards it.

'Get hold of it properly. It won't bite.' His hands clamped down over hers, pressing her fingers round the wheel. 'Just don't hit anything, that's all.'

He was off and she was alone and in charge. After a few moments, it was an exhilarating experience. The boat cut through the water, making its own wash, passing mallard and teal in groups on the river.

'Mute swans,' Rhian said behind her, startling her. She had not realized he had returned. 'Probably male and female.. Beautiful birds.' Marettta glanced at them, noticing how their orange beaks stood out against their white plumage. 'They aren't as silent as their name implies. When they're annoyed they snort and hiss.'

'Please take over, Rhian,' she pleaded.

'You're doing fine.'

'Please, I'm so afraid I'll go into the bank.'

He came close behind her and put his hands over hers, helping her steer. His nearness flustered her, his tanned arms rubbing against her skin excited her too much. She turned her head to plead again when his lips came down and pressed hers. 'Stop fussing, my dearest girl, as my father would say. I never would have believed you would manage a boat so well first time. There are brains under that silky soft hair, after all.'

'Rhian,' she said desperately, feeling him pressing against her, 'I'm so hungry I'll—'

'Go on,' he pushed her away, 'I'll find somewhere to tie up, then we can eat. Can't have my father accusing me of starving his wife-to-be.'

He steered the boat towards the bank, brought it alongside and took the rope in his hand. Holding it, he leapt on to the grass, secured it with a strong knot around the trunk of a tree and jumped back on board.

In an open hamper there were cups and plates and in plastic containers, salad stuffs, a selection of cold meats and rolls, Marett stared at it all. 'Where did this come from? Mrs. Fiske?'

'No. I phoned through to a shopkeeper I know where the boat was moored. I ordered it and he came on board and left it here.' He pointed to a couple of vacuum flasks. 'Coffee or tea, whichever you want. Powdered milk, sugar lumps.'

'He's thought of everything.'

'Not quite. I provided the woman.'

She ignored the taunt. 'May I start?'

'Help yourself. Imagine you're part-owner. You nearly are, anyway. A month or two and you'll be my father's bride. Won't you?'

There was something in his voice which made her look at him. It was as though summer had turned to winter. His smile had gone, the eyes were hard.

It was a challenge she could not allow to pass. 'Yes,' she answered lightly, and dipped into the hamper.

Lunch over, they were on their way again. Maretta wondered where they were making for and how far Rhian intended going before turning back. They were some distance from home and it would take an hour or two's drive from the river to get there.

'Maretta,' he called her to his side, and when she came, he put a careless arm across her shoulders, 'let me see how much you've learnt from my father's teaching. Look there.' She moved her eyes in the exact direction in which he was pointing. 'Identify that bird.'

She made an immense effort to see - let alone to name - the bird he was indicating and was in the act of shaking her head miserably when she cried, 'I can see it - it's a snipe! And it was you who showed it to me first, not your father. When we went to Breckland - don't you remember?'

'Ah, yes. I recall that enjoyable day. And the relationship that evolved between us, when we let our desires off the leash and - look, a kingfisher! There, on that branch.' With one hand off the steering wheel, he turned her head in the right direction. 'See it?'

'Yes, yes,' she whispered excitedly. Did Rhian's closeness heighten *all* her senses, including sight? 'It's beautiful.' She gazed at its bright plumage, the brilliant blue-green, and the orange colour underneath. Then it moved and she gasped, feeling Rhian's arm tighten round her. There was a flash of sapphire and orange as the bird streaked downstream, leaving behind a rainbow of colour.

'A rare sight indeed,' Rhian said, his arm still tight around her waist. 'Think yourself lucky you saw one.'

She looked up at him shyly. 'You're teaching me a lot of things, Rhian. More, in fact, than your father.'

'Am I?' She frowned, puzzled by his tone, then she realized he had read more than one meaning into her words.

For some time there was only the swish of the water as the boat moved along, the cries and laughter of other people in their river craft. Children ran about on the banks. Adults emerging from tents called out to them. There were bushes and trees at the water's edge, sailing boats beached, their sails down. Now and then there were, on each side, great stretches of farmland, cultivated or with cattle grazing. Here and there stood the ruins of a windmill, telling of industrious times long past.

On one side now were stretches of reeds. Rhian pointed them out and said that the reeds were collected in some places on the Broads and used for thatching. 'You can see the best of English thatching in Norfolk. It's a skilled craft. It's also big business these days. They even export the reeds, especially to America.'

He still had not let her go, although with his arm round her it left him only one hand with which to steer the cruiser. 'Some say,' he said, 'that the Broads are Holland in miniature. The rivers resemble the Dutch canals. Although some of the countryside has shallow hills, other parts are flat, just as it is in Holland. The windmills increase the resemblance, too.'

At last he let her go, and she felt a pang of disappointment, but she realized he was pulling into a shaded part of the bank. 'What are you doing?'

'Taking a rest.' He secured the boat to a post and reached down, his hand extended for her to take it. 'Come on up. We'll sunbathe.'

She looked at her watch. 'Shouldn't we be getting back?'

'With that sun still warm up there? Anyway, there's our evening meal to have first. The shopkeeper packed enough in the hamper to last a week.'

A little reluctantly, she grasped his hand and he pulled her up beside him. She looked around. 'There's nothing to lie on.'

'If you're that fussy—' He returned to the boat and emerged with a rug, spreading it out on the grass.

They lay side by side, quite still. Maretta wondered if her presence was having any effect on him at all. There was a powerful restlessness in her limbs which she acknowledged was there because of the length of him beside her. His shirt was unbuttoned and the rays of the sun were adding to the tan on his chest. She wanted so much to touch him that she had to clench her fists to restrain her instincts.

After a while she ventured, 'Rhian?' He turned his head. 'How did you get so sun-tanned? Was it from where you've been working abroad?'

He lifted his head, smiled and dropped it again. 'Hardly. I've just come back from North Alaska. I was in Malaysia for a spell before that, which is where I got the tan. It's taken a long time to fade.'

'The change of climate from one temperature to the other must have been a shock.'

'It was traumatic. It took me weeks to acclimatize to the cold.'

'What was it like there?'

He raised an arm and shaded his eyes, as if shutting out the sun helped him to remember. 'Tough. Howling wind most of the time. Had to wear layers of clothes, endless sweaters, not to mention woollen hats, gloves, snow-boots. Jackets with fur collars and hoods. Goggles to stop the snow blinding us. Geologists in the field are rough and ready in their appearance. No good being clothes-conscious when you're searching for things like oil.'

She laughed. 'It's hard to imagine you all tattered and torn. Did you grow a beard?'

He fingered his chin. 'Yes, partly because it was such a nuisance having to shave every day and partly because a beard kept you warm.'

She half-turned on to her side to look at him. 'Did you look like your father?'

'With a beard? No.' He sounded a little sharp. 'You may not have noticed in your lovesick state, but he and I are very different in our colouring. He's dark, I'm fair-to-brown.'

'Do you—' Dared she ask? 'Do you take after your mother in that respect?'

'Possibly.' Now there was no doubt about the shortness of his tone. It was some time before he spoke again and what he said revealed that his mind had changed the subject. 'There were problems in such a climate. For instance, how to get the oil out to the inhabited parts of the world.'

'What about ships?'

'Sea frozen for most of the year.'

'I thought the usual way to bring out oil was by pipeline?'

'Overland - well,' he laughed, 'you may not believe it, but there the snag was that it might disturb the migration of the caribou. If you took it underground by pipeline, the hot oil would melt the frozen ground.'

She raised herself on to her elbow and pulled at a piece of grass. 'How did you know where to look for oil?'

'Partly by looking at air photographs. You study the rock structure they reveal thousands of feet below the surface. We also use instruments to study changes in the earth's magnetic and gravity fields; or we use seismology, that is, we make mock earthquakes. Shock waves travel at different speeds through different rocks. When we think we have the right rock structure, we do test drillings and bring up cores of rock. I've got some samples in my study. I'll show you them some time.' He lifted his head, looking at her through slitted eyes. 'And if you do that much longer, sweetheart, you'll arouse me so much you'll wonder what's hit you.'

Scarlet-faced, she realized what she had been doing all the time he had been talking. With the piece of grass she had pulled she had been idly, unconsciously trailing it over his bare arm, from his wrist to his elbow and back again.

She tore the grass into pieces and shifted away. 'I'm sorry, I didn't realize what I was doing.'

He sat up, resting on his elbow. 'A psychologist would have said you knew perfectly well what you were doing.'

Hurriedly she stood, brushing her pants and smoothing her hair. 'I'm going back to the boat. We really should be on our way soon, Rhian.'

He rose and stretched and followed her back to the boat, shaking out the rug on which they had been lying and throwing it down on one of the berths.

He pulled on a shirt and they dipped into the hamper again for their meal, bringing out sandwiches and another flask of coffee. 'I really have enjoyed today, Rhian,' Marettta said, replacing the top on the empty flask. 'Thank you for bringing me.'

'It was my pleasure entirely,' he returned mockingly, and pushed the hamper under a shelf.

He untied the boat, started the engine and turned it round, then they were on their way back. They moved at a leisurely pace, so slowly at times that Marettta grew anxious. The sun was setting now. It was low and golden, filling the sky with a brilliance which was reflected in the ripples on the almost motionless water. Most of the rivercraft seemed to have been moored for the night, with only a yacht or two here and there, their sails orange-white in the light from the setting sun.

It came to Marettta that they were in unfamiliar waters. It was not the way back. When she said as much to Rhian, he laughed but made no comment. Some time later, as he began to pull over to the bank, steering towards a secluded area surrounded by overhanging trees, Marettta's suspicions were aroused.

'Where are we going now?' she asked sharply.

'Nowhere, sweet. We're staying right here.'

'But we've got to get back. It's late already and—'

'I said,' he repeated quietly, 'we're staying here. For the night.'

She sprang across the intervening space and in her fear, she tried to wrench the steering wheel round so that they were making for the open river again. He took his hands from the wheel and threw her aside, then he carried on steering.

It was his determination that frightened her more than the bruises she sustained as she tripped and fell over the coil of rope. She picked herself up immediately. 'We're not - we can't stay here. My mother - she'll worry. You've no right-'

'Agreed. No right, but I don't care a damn. *We're staying!*'

'Rhian,' she whispered, pale now. 'Please ...'

He was unmoved, and tied the boat securely to a post which seemed to be there for that purpose.

It was almost dark now, and a chill came into the air, invading Maretta's body. She was to stay here with him - all night? At his mercy entirely? If he followed his desires, alone as they were, there would be nothing she could do. He had the power, the strength - the overwhelming attraction - to get what he wanted from her.

She pleaded with him, tears welling up, 'Please, Rhian, take me back.'

'What?' he mocked. 'Lose a golden opportunity? Not on your life!'

She flared, 'Is this another way you've thought up of taking me away from your father?'

'Does the motive matter? You're here, I'm here. Let's make the most of it.'

'You're all I said you were,' she stormed, 'unscrupulous, ruthless ...' She turned and ran, leaping from the boat and on to the bank. 'You can't make me stay with you!'

She started to run, groping her way through the trees, her feet dragging through the brambles, but he was after her and holding her, anywhere he could find - her hair, her thin summer top. He brought her up sharply and swung her round to face him. 'You're staying,' he said, violence latent in his eyes, 'if I have to use the rope to tie you down.'

It was no use opposing him, he had the whip-hand and he knew it. She trailed behind him, his hand round her wrist like a vice. He pushed her in front of him on to the boat.

'Try running away again,' he threatened, 'and see what happens.'

Hopelessly she sank on to one of the berths, her head in her hands, her hair swinging forward. The mattress on which she was sitting was depressed by his weight as he came to sit beside her, but she shrank away from him. His mood seemed to have changed. His voice was softer as he spoke, but it filled her with an even greater fear than his anger. What couldn't he get from a woman if he exercised his charm?

His hand found the side of her head, pulling it down so that her cheek rested against his chest. 'Give to me, sweetie,' he said softly, 'give to me what I want and what you want to give. You won't regret it, I promise.' Crying now, she shook her head. 'Let me make love to you, let me show you what love from a *young* man is like. I'm April, not September, like my father. This is how a young man kisses.' He pushed her down until her head was against the pillow. 'Not like this,' his lips brushed her cheek, 'but like this.' His lips crushed her mouth.

At first she yielded, revelling in his touch, his flesh on her flesh, the feeling that slowly, inevitably, he was making her part of him. Not long now, she thought hazily, delightedly, before she belonged to him. The thought took shape and meaning. The effect it would have on her life - not his - if it happened hit her like an avalanche a mountain climber.

To him it would make no difference. He had known it all before. To her it would bring about a catastrophic change within herself, her future, her world.

She struggled then to get away from him, hitting, pushing, scratching, but it was like trying to get a tiger off her back. What could she do to stop him? Words, they were her only weapon now. She twisted her head away, freeing her mouth.

'I won't be used by you to satisfy a *biological need*! That was what you called it, wasn't it? No man who takes me takes my love and then takes his leave. Your words, every single one!' He slackened a little in his pressure upon her and she managed to squirm from under him, finding her feet and standing some distance away, flushed, hot, dishevelled. 'You won't *take* from me, then find *my* loving arms winding in gratitude round your neck. Your words again. I'm not the sort who can love a man and watch him walk away without the slightest flicker of feeling.- Am I quoting right?' Her voice was high and brittle and full of sarcasm.

In desperation she played her last and most telling card. 'I love your father, Rhian, and he trusts me. I won't do anything, anything at all to betray that trust.' If she was not telling the truth, if she was exaggerating her feeling of fondness for Harford into something much deeper, then, she told herself miserably, she was only doing it as an act of self-preservation.

He seemed moved at last into some response. 'All right,' he bit out, rising and smoothing his hair, 'you're safe, quite, quite safe. I wouldn't lay a finger on my future *mother*!'

The shock of his words was so great, she collapsed on to the other berth. *His mother*! Yes, in marrying Rhian's father, she would become Rhian's stepmother. The idea seemed so incredible, so unbelievable, she pressed her hands to her ears to keep out the sound of his words. But no matter how she tried, they kept on ringing in her brain.

The journey back in the early morning was silent. Maretta had tossed and turned in her berth just across the gangway from Rhian. She knew she had slept a little because once she had woken herself by crying out.

In her wakeful periods she had listened for any sign of restlessness from Rhian, but there had been none. His breathing had been even and slow, but whether he was sleeping or merely relaxing deeply, she could not tell. In his work on many of the sites on which he had been employed abroad, he must have grown accustomed to more uncomfortable places to sleep in than the berth of a motor cruiser, however small.

The air had a sweet-smelling fragrance, the birds all around dipped and dived and soared with morning vigour. Their calls had been joyous and light, and Maretta felt her unhappiness all the more deeply in contrast with their pleasure in the fresh new day. What could it bring her but more unhappiness?

Rhian, at the wheel, was tall, commanding, the muscles in his arms standing out strongly at every turn and correction of their course. She had come to know so well the strength of those arms, the power they held when they came around her to force her to do his bidding. It was not with her strength that she had resisted him but with the caustic words she had used about him, with the half-lies she had told.

The boat was tied at its moorings, the hamper returned to the shop not far from the water's edge. The drive home had been equally silent, with a word now and then from one or the other only if it was absolutely necessary.

Near the end of the journey, Maretta said, breaking the silence, 'My mother -I must find her and tell her where I've been. She'll be worried sick about me.'

'She knew where you were.'

Her head swung round to stare at his rigid profile. It was a few moments before Maretta could find the words to speak. 'She - *knew*? You told her?' It was almost as if he had not heard her. 'You and she - you connived between

you to keep me out with you all night? She actually *wanted* you to—' She could not say the words.

Her own mother collaborating with Rhian Tudor? But why? Why not? Didn't they both share the same opinion - that she should not be engaged to Harford, let alone intend to marry him? So what was easier than for them to get together and plan this night out?

Rhian had scarcely applied the brakes than she was out of the car. In the double garage Harford's blue car was parked neatly to one side.

'I must find Harford,' she murmured to herself as she ran towards the front door. But a hand closed in a grip of iron on her wrist. 'You're coming with me,' Rhian said grimly. 'I have' something to show you, something I consider you should see.'

In vain she pulled and jerked at her arm. She could not free herself from him. His face was set and implacable. In the hall they passed Josephine, a ready smile on her face. As her eyes met her daughter's and slipped to Rhian's, her smile died and a worried frown took its place.

'Mother,' Maretta cried, as Rhian pulled her up the stairs, 'how *could* you? How *could* you do that to me?'

'Darling—' Josephine began, but they were round the curve in the stairs and out of sight.

Rhian pulled Maretta behind him towards a door. It was, Maretta knew, his father's bedroom, a room she had never seen. Rhian flung the door open and pushed her in front of him.

All Maretta saw at first was that the room was empty, Harford was not there. Then, as her eyes began to take in details, she was frozen into an unbelieving stillness.

On every spare space, on tables, windowsills, chests of drawers, the bedside table, all over the walls, were photographs - of a young woman. A young woman so like herself it was impossible, at first sight, to believe they were in

fact different people. There was an incredible likeness in the features, the wide, almond-shaped eyes, the full mouth, the arched brows and high cheekbones. But more than anything else, there was a similarity in the colour of the hair - a pale, golden brown exactly like her own, the colour she herself shared with Rhian.

So Rhian, in his colouring and his features, had taken after his mother, not his father at all.

This was a shrine to a long-dead wife, a wife Harford had never forgotten, whose memory he held in such reverence it seemed he had sworn never to forget her.

It explained so many things, the strange words he had uttered about knowing her for years, about waiting so long for her to come back to him, about the yellow dress suiting her ... About the way he had told Rhian never to touch her ...

Compassion filled her, her lip quivered - and she swung round at the sound of her name. Harford was there behind her, his eyes brilliant with an anger that terrified her, a man so changed from the gentle one she had known and who had professed to love her that she could hardly believe the two were the same.

'So you spent the night with my son?' The tone was cold, the words spoken with something bordering on hatred. 'He made love to you and now you're his.' It was a statement; he was not questioning her.

'Harford,' she went towards him, trying to comfort him, but he backed away as if he could not bear to be near her. 'It's not true, Harford. Yes, we spent the night together, in the cabin cruiser, but we slept apart.'

'I don't believe you.' He spoke flatly, without a trace of colour in his voice. 'No woman spending the night with my son could spend it anywhere but in his arms. I know him too well.'

'Harford,' she held out her hand with his ring on her finger, 'there is such a thing as trust.'

'Trust!' he spat out. 'Don't talk to me about trust. You've let me down so badly, I can never trust you again.'

His eyes had a glazed look, as though he was only half aware of what he was saying. Maretti had a strange feeling that he was not talking to her, but to someone - something - else. To the girl who had lived inside him for so many years, lived untouched, inviolate, in his memory.

The dreams he had cherished about her were gone, never to return, the dreams beyond the horizon. And beyond those dreams, he was facing his reality at last.

CHAPTER TEN

It was all over and Maretta was alone. She stared out of the window of the living-room at her home and wondered when her mother would come. Horizon Hall, Harford, Rhian - they were all behind her now. It was a finished chapter, a closed book in her life. She was even without a job, having given it up at Harford's request when they became engaged.

No one had known she had gone. After she had rushed from Harford's anger, everyone had retreated into their own rooms, their own worlds. She had been washed up on a desert island of her' own making, cutting herself off from all contact with the others in the house. Even her mother she had not been able to face.

The phone rang, as it had done so many times that day, and the day before, from the moment of her arrival. Not once had she answered it. Whoever it was - Harford, her mother, Rhian - even the thought of him made her heart beat faster - would go unanswered as far as she was concerned. She had nothing to say to any of them.

Her clothes were still at Horizon Hall. She had not bothered to pack her cases. All she had wanted to do was to take her coat and go away.- She had walked to the village, caught a bus to Norwich and the next train home, leaving her mother to pick up the pieces. It would not be long, she was certain, before her mother returned.

But two days passed and her mother did not come. Even the phone calls had stopped. The resulting silence, after the constant clamour of the bell, was more unnerving than the idea of an unanswered caller impatiently waiting at the other end of the line.

It was in the early hours of her third night alone that the phone rang again. Dazed with sleep, her barriers weakened by fatigue, Maretta found her way down to the hall and answered the call.

'Maretta?' She did not answer. 'Darling, I've been trying for so long to contact you. Are you well?'

'Yes, thank you, Mother,' Maretta replied stiffly.

'I've been so worried, dear. Why didn't you answer the phone?' Maretta greeted the question with silence. 'Darling, Rhian wants to speak to you.'

Maretta put the phone down and found her way wearily back to bed. But she did not sleep. Instead, she lay awake expecting the phone to ring again. Even when the dawn broke and the sun rose high, there had still been no repeat of the call. Giving up at last, she fell into a deep, exhausted sleep, only to awaken to the sound of the doorbell.

Her watch told her it was well into the morning. She lifted her housecoat from the back of the door and stumbled down the stairs. It was surely her mother at last! It was not until she had turned the catch and was pulling the front door open that she remembered her mother would have used her key.

By then it was too late. Even as she tried to push the door shut again, Rhian had his shoulder to it and was forcing her back with the door. Then he closed it and stood, arms folded, regarding her. Only then did she become conscious of how dishevelled she must look, her hair awry, her housecoat pulled round her, the belt hanging loose.

'As I thought,' he murmured, 'white face, great shadowed eyes, half-starved through loss of appetite. Is your broken engagement preying on you so much it's making you ill? Do you want my father back?'

'Get out,' she said quietly, 'or I'll call the police.'

He moved slowly to put himself between her and the telephone. 'You'll have to get past me first. And you know by now how easily I grapple with recalcitrant women. And how easily I win.'

She motioned him into the living-room, then thinking she would catch him off-guard, made a dive for the telephone. But he had been ready for the action. He swung round, caught at the back of her housecoat and jerked her against him so hard she was winded.

He held her thus for a few moments, then she struggled and he imprisoned her arms, pinioning them to her sides. 'Behave,' he said. He looked over her shoulder and down the length of her. 'Heaven knows, you're vulnerable enough.'

Her nightdress was low-cut and brief. Her head drooped as she stood helplessly in his hold and he made the most of her embarrassment.-

'Rhian,' she said hoarsely, 'I'll behave. But please let me go and put some clothes on. I promise not to try to get away.'

He released her and she rubbed her arms where his fingers had bruised her. 'You keep that promise, otherwise,' through narrowed lids, 'I'll live up to my reputation for ruthlessness, barbarity and unspeakable cruelty to womankind. Whether or not that reputation is merited, I'll show *you* no mercy.: Is that understood?'

She nodded and climbed the stairs, step by slow step. When she reached the top her heart was pounding as if she had raced up them. Rhian was here, and she must do everything in her power to send him away. As she dressed, pulling on jeans and a ribbed top, combed her hair and applied a little make-up, she wondered where she was going to find the resolution and determination to do so*

When she came down the stairs, he was lingering in the hall. It seemed he had not trusted her enough to wait in the living-room; He followed her in, glancing quickly round, taking in the comfortable but well-worn look of the furniture, the photographs on the mantelpiece, the piano against the wall, a television set on a small table; The contrast between her living conditions and his own at Horizon Hall must have registered, but he showed no sign of it.

She motioned him to a seat, but he remained standing, watching her lower herself into a deep armchair. 'My father would like to see you.' The flinch she gave at his words did not pass him by.- 'He feels an explanation is due which he maintains is better expressed verbally than on paper.'

'I understand everything perfectly, thank you. I don't need an explanation.'

'All right, if you won't hear it from him, then you'll damned* well listen to me. Let's start at the beginning.' He walked about the room. 'My parents were young when they married, barely nineteen. When my father married my mother, he was aware, because she had told him, that she had a heart condition. She had been warned by a doctor never to have children, but she wouldn't listen to him. She persuaded my father, against his will, to let her have the baby she longed for. She survived my birth by only a few hours, long enough to know that she had had a son and to whisper to my father that he must call me Rhian Harford Tudor.'

He gazed out of the window.- 'She knew she was dying, but she told my father at the end that her only regret was that she had to leave him, my father, behind.' There was a long silence. 'They had been deeply in love. After her death, my father remained in love with her to such an extent that he turned his bedroom into a kind of shrine to my mother's memory. He vowed he would never forget her and never remarry.'

He came to stand in front of her. 'Until he met you, who so resembled her that he, scientist though he was and who thought at other times with rationality and cold reasoning, sincerely believed that she had come back to life in you.'

With large eyes she looked up at him. 'He often came to stand beside me and watched me putting the equipment together for the simplest of experiments. I couldn't understand why. He didn't even seem to see the other lab assistants. It was only me, no one else.'

Rhian nodded. 'Now you know why. You also know why he invited you to stay with him, why he started to kiss you, make love to you—'

'Never, in the sense you mean!' she cried. 'He didn't touch me in that way, not even when we became engaged. He treated me - well, with a kind of reverence.'

'Which is exactly what I mean. You were his "wife", yet not his "wife". In his dreams he was "allowed" to touch you, in reality he did not.'

'Why were you always quarrelling with him?'

'Because he had to blame someone for my mother's death. I was the cause of it, or so he reasoned, so I must bear the guilt of her death all my life. Deep down, of course, he has always blamed himself, but because he had to live with himself, he couldn't spend the rest of his life with that burden on his shoulders, so he shifted it to me.'

At last he sat down, across the room, in the shadow. 'I kept you out with me in the boat all night, not with the intention of seducing you, although as you must be aware, through reasons best kept to myself, I came very near to it. I kept you out with me - with your mother's consent - because I knew that after a night spent in my company, he would think the worst and that, I hoped, I gambled, would be sufficient to make him come to his senses.' He inspected his nails. 'Somehow I had to make you, also, see sense. So I pitchforked you into his room where you, too, came face to face with reality.'

There seemed to be nothing to say, so Maretta stayed silent, leaving the next move to him.

'I phoned your mother one evening and had a long talk with her about you and my father. I discovered she was as opposed to the marriage as I was, so I suggested that she should take up my father's invitation to stay at Horizon Hall, talk to you and try to persuade you to break off the engagement.'

'So that's why you went to meet her at the station? I often wondered how you managed to recognize her.'

'We'd arranged something beforehand. Anyway, she's so like you I could hardly make a mistake.' He flipped at his tie, studying its colours. 'Incidentally, she sends her love. And I was to tell you that she and Harford are getting to know each other better every day. It seems she's persuaded him to put away his photographs for ever. One day, she hopes, he might face the future with a new partner.' He smiled briefly. 'After all, as I said, she's very like you and therefore bears a strong resemblance to my mother. An older version, perhaps.'

Her mother and Harford! The thought at first startled, then pleased Maretta.

'You may also like to know,' Rhian went on, 'that the situation between my father and myself has eased considerably. When you brought him face to face with the many truths he had refused to accept in the past, he was honest enough to admit that he had kept his feelings for me in such iron control that they had warped our relationship all through my life. We are now friends, as well as father and son.'

Maretta took a deep breath. She sensed they had come to the end of the explanations. 'Is that all you have to say?'

He hedged. 'Have *you* anything to say?'

'What about?' she responded woodenly.

'One fine evening you told me something and I've often wondered whether or not it was true.'

'That I loved you? I told you,' her voice was harsh, 'I said it under duress. I heard you tell your father that you'd gone all out to make me fall in love with you to bring him to his senses. So what good would it have done even if it had been true? I know how you regard women. No ties, you said, no wife tagging along behind, no kids to get in the way.' Her voice had risen despite her attempts to control it. 'You know what I think of you, too. I've told you many times.'

He shrugged, then rose and looked down at her. 'Well, I guess that's it.'

They gazed at each other, he dispassionate and cool, she unbelieving and with a quivering lip. He was going? She would never see him again? Well, she was driving him away, wasn't she?

'Good-bye,' she said stonily.

'Good-bye, Maretta.' He looked at her with narrow, considering eyes. They held an expression that turned her cold. Then he swooped, like an eagle, and she was his prey again and he was draining the life from her.

His arms imprisoned her, his lips prising hers apart as he crushed her to him. His passion became infused with tenderness, his hands, impatient of her clothes, touching her body in a caressing, intimate way. In this new mood of gentleness and persuasion, in place of the brutally demanding approaches he had made so often in the past, she was helpless and compliant and yielded to him whatever he wanted of her, responding to his kisses and his passion until it measured up to his. Then, incredibly, coolly, he put her from him and made for the door.

She stared after him. He was leaving her, after all she had tried to tell him in her actions and responses to his love-making? So what he had said about himself was true?

'Rhian?'

He turned and saw that her eyes had flooded with tears. 'Take your love and take your leave? You meant it, every word?'

'Yes, I meant it. It's still true. But in a different sense.' A strange smile played about his tight lips. 'I can't take my love, so I must take my leave.' He whispered, 'Good-bye, Marett,' and turned back to the door.

'Don't go!' It was an anguished cry as she ran after him. 'Tell me what you mean.' In a whisper, 'Please tell me, Rhian.'

He came towards her again, walking slowly. 'Don't you think,' he spoke softly, 'it would be better if you told me what *you* mean?'

Her tongue was stiff and obstinate, her lips parched.

'Show me,' he urged, 'if you can't tell me.'

With a small cry she ran the rest of the way, encircling his waist with her arms and resting her cheek against his chest. His arms came round her and he murmured, 'Look at me, my own, my darling,' and as her face lifted to his, his mouth came down and claimed hers in a seeking, ardent kiss.

'From the moment I saw you,' he whispered, 'I wanted you. I realized the first time we met why my father had chosen you. The similarity of your features and your colouring to my mother's were unbelievable. But I hadn't expected you to be so young. I could see from the start what a mistake my father was making, how he was deluding himself. I knew about the photographs in his room and how by a crazy twist of his imagination he was thinking you were his beloved wife come back to him. He was making a terrible mistake in trying to graft her personality on to you. The problem was how to make him see it. Not to mention make you realize what a mistake *you* were making.'

She pulled away from him a little. 'Why were you and your father always quarrelling? Why did he seem to hate you so, Rhian?'

'Think, sweetheart.' He pulled her close again. 'He had suffered for thirty-two years. All that time he was full of vain longing for his lost love. For thirty-two years he had borne a grudge against me, a senseless, futile grudge. As I grew older, I realized how unfair to me he was being in blaming me for my mother's death. But understanding doesn't always bring with it forgiveness, so I couldn't find it within myself to do that - until now, now when he has inadvertently given me my life's happiness - you, my darling.'

'But, Rhian,' still she sought reassurance, 'you invited Doranne to stay, you openly showed your preference for her.'

'And why did I ask her there? With one objective - to make you jealous. Did I succeed?' His eyes teased her.

'If you must know,' she smiled, lifted a hand and tugged playfully at his hair, 'I suffered agonies.'

'I'm glad.' She pouted a little at his words. 'Sorry, my darling, but that's my brutality coming out. I warn you, I won't be a gentle lover, not all the time.' He stroked her hair as she rested her cheek against him. 'I wanted to fight my father with all the weapons I had - my strength, my youth - for the only woman I ever wanted to possess for love instead of selfish satisfaction.' He whispered, his lips brushing her ear, 'The only woman I have ever wanted to make my wife, to have at my side every possible minute of the day. Now,

sweetheart,' how softly, how sincerely he said the word this time, 'do you know how much I love you? How you've wounded me by the names you've called me? And why I wanted you to say, forced you to say, that evening we dined together, that you loved me? Not only to make my father see sense, but to make *you* see it, too, to make you realize that you couldn't marry the father when it was the son you loved!'

'But,' she sought his eyes, still uncertain, 'those things you've said about your freedom - or,' tremulously, 'don't you intend to marry me?'

He laughed out loud. 'Intend to marry you? I insist on marrying you! How else can I be sure you won't at some time in the future be so stupid again as to fix on a man old enough to have fathered you to be your life's partner? You'll wear my ring and no one else's. You'll bear my children and mine alone.'

They kissed again and he drew her down beside him on the couch. 'And as for my freedom - it will be all the greater with someone to share it. When I walk across deserts in the future, there will be two sets of footprints in the sand - yours and mine!'