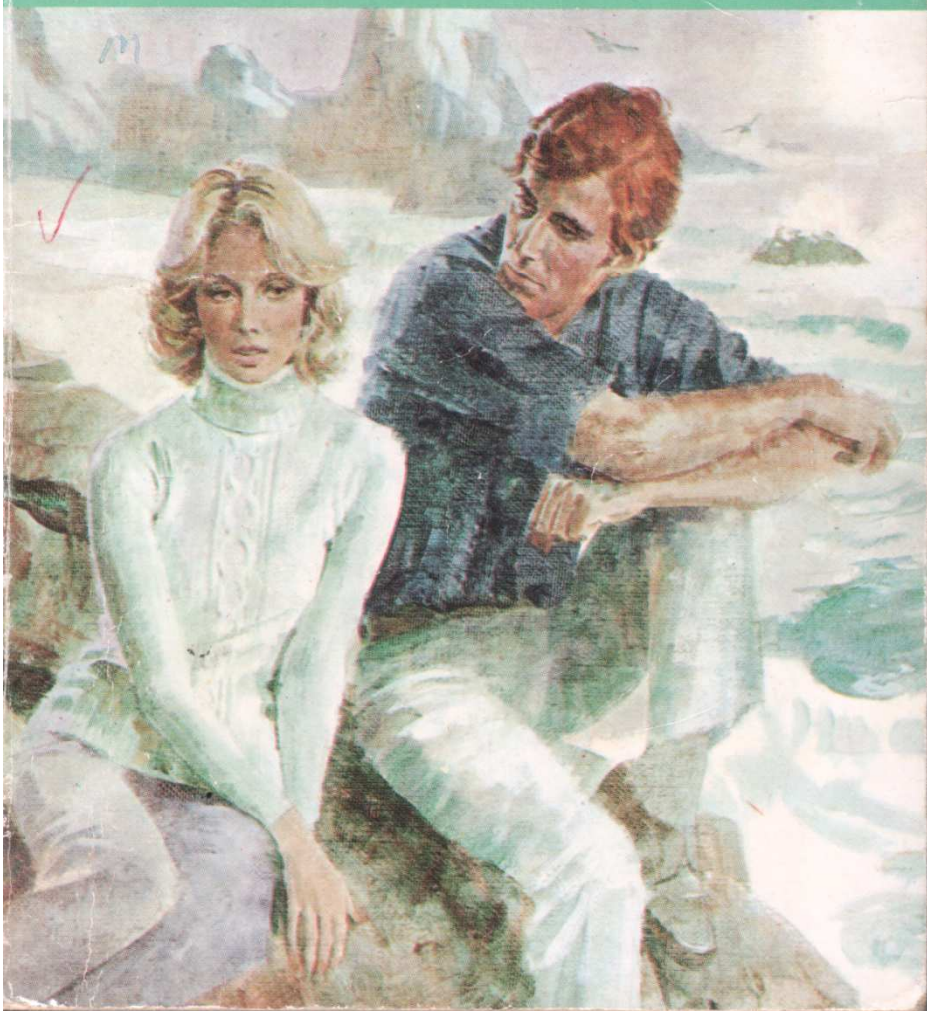




Mills & Boon

THE SILVER CAGE

Jane Donnelly



THE SILVER CAGE

Jane Donnelly

Even after she and Kern McCabe were married Philippa felt she must be dreaming. Why should such an attractive man want to make her his wife? But she might have come to understand his love for her--if the glamorous Lillas Storr hadn't suddenly come back into Kern's life.

CHAPTER ONE

FLEUR SORREL, tall, slender, breathtakingly beautiful and looking not a day over twenty-seven, tossed back her dark auburn hair—it had been a long hot afternoon—and said wearily, 'My God, darling, you look like a corn dolly!'

The girl who was assisting Fleur Sorrel, in the rather unrewarding task of finding something to suit her daughter, smiled uncertainly. This was the fourth dress they had tried, and there had been nothing wrong with any of them, it was the girl who did nothing for the clothes. She was small and thin, with a pale pointed face, and fair hair that had become more dishevelled as dress after dress was pulled over it.

She looked at herself now. In the beige silk dress with its straight bodice down to her narrow hips, and knife-pleated skirt, she did look a little like one of the faceless dolls, made of twisted straw, rough facsimiles of a female figure, that hung in country craft shops.

She grinned at her reflection, and her grin was quick and gay. 'That's me,' she said. 'A corn dolly. Sit me on the mantelpiece and I'll bring you luck.'

'Don't be absurd.' Fleur sounded as though she could lose her temper any moment now. She was lolling gracefully on a white chair, wearing white slacks and a brown silk shirt, her beautiful brown feet in thin golden strap sandals.

She could have worn any of these dresses—in a size that allowed for another eight inches of height—and looked marvellous. She looked marvellous now, she was as fantastic in real life as she was on the TV screen. There was no mistaking her. When she had come into the shop everyone had given her a second glance, and practically everyone had recognised her.

The assistant who had asked if she could help had been told they were looking for a party dress for the girl walking just behind Fleur, and when the girl said gravely, 'Yes, Mother,' in reply to Fleur's query,

'Do you like that colour?' the salesgirl couldn't believe her ears. Or her eyes, because how could such a drab little mouse be Fleur Sorrel's daughter?

They settled for the beige silk, and went out of the shop as they had come in, Fleur with her loose-limbed model girl stride, the girl slightly behind her. The assistant went back to her colleagues and asked them, 'What about that, then? Her *daughter*. She must take after her father, and he can't be much to look at.'

'He is, you know.' Another salesgirl had read an article about Fleur Sorrel—when she was appearing in a TV saga—pictured in her beautiful country home, with her very handsome husband, whom she had married the summer she left school and whose family had owned the estate for generations. The interview had mentioned a daughter, away at boarding school, so this must be the girl, and who would have imagined that Fleur Sorrel's daughter could be almost plain ?

Of course the shop assistants were surprised. Everyone was surprised when they learned that Philippa's parents were Philip and Fleur Sorrel. All her life she had been overshadowed by the two beautiful people, who should have had either the brilliant son her father had wanted, or the enchanting daughter her mother had confidently expected.

They had been married twelve months when Philippa was born, a disappointment to both of them from the start, and then Fleur had begun to do a little modelling, graduating to acting, and for the last ten years a well-known TV face and name. There were no more children. Fleur had never really had the time or the inclination for maternity, and Philip accepted that, because the way things were

these days there wouldn't be a hell of a lot of the estate to leave to a son anyway.

Philip ran the estate, that was his business, but his real interest was sport and travel. He was an all-round athlete who had never been quite Wimbledon or Olympic standard but pretty near, and although past his peak he was still in the running. Fleur's passion now was finding ways and means to stay looking twenty-seven at thirty-seven, and she seemed to be succeeding.

Among their friends their marriage was considered nearly perfect, their devotion to each other was unquestioned. In fact they were a charming superficial pair, fond of each other, but only deeply concerned for themselves, and to both of them Philippa was an embarrassment.

Their friends could understand it. At the christening guests had hovered around the cot predicting that the peaky-looking baby would develop into a ravishingly pretty little girl. But she hadn't. She had been a small pale child, seen against her mother's vivid colouring of rich auburn hair and honey-gold skin, and Fleur had packed her off to boarding school at the first opportunity, explaining, 'The poor darling needs friends of her own age, and we do know the school very well—I went there myself.'

Fleur Sorrel was still remembered as Fleur Conway at Maybridge Hall. The staff who had been there in her day always referred to Philippa as 'Fleur Conway's daughter'. The school was an old manor house in the Kent countryside, where there was no strain towards academic achievements as the girls were all from wealthy families and not expected to face the problem of actually having to earn a living. Philippa was intelligent and would have benefited from a different type of tuition, but at Maybridge Hall they turned out 'ladies'.

She made friends there who liked her immensely. She was kind, and funny. She made fun of herself a lot. Because Fleur was an old girl they were allowed to watch her plays on television, subject to censorship if the play was too permissive, and always afterwards girls would be coming up to Philippa and saying, 'I can't believe she's your mother, you're not a bit alike.'

Philippa would laugh and say, 'My mother can't believe it either. Every holiday she and my father look more astonished when they see me.'

With ordinary parents she would have been reckoned an attractive, nearly pretty girl, but her parents were in no way ordinary and her fooling was defensive. She laughed at herself before anyone else could. 'I'm the changeling of the family,' she'd say. 'My parents often wonder if I was swapped for their real daughter one dark and stormy night.'

Inevitably, at school, girls would ask her if she wanted to be an actress like her mother, and she would say gravely, 'I'm going to be a circus clown. I don't have the figure for sexpot roles, but I'll wow 'em in a red nose and baggy pants.' Then she would do her Charlie Chaplin walk, and the little group of girls would be convulsed with laughter.

In fact Philippa hated the limelight. When she had to step out of the crowd she was racked with shyness, although she usually managed to hide it.

On speech days her parents would arrive, if they were in the country and had nothing more interesting to do. There were wealthier, more important parents, but the Sorrels were always the stars. There was no one to touch them for charisma, and although Philippa wanted them to come, and wanted to see them, speech days were agony to her.

She always had to go up on stage to receive a prize, and it was all she could do to get out, 'Thank you,' when the book was handed over to her. She could feel astonished eyes on her—'Is *that* Fleur Sorrel's daughter?'—and she would get off that stage as fast as she-»could, head high, smile fixed, looking directly at no one until long after she had taken her seat again.

She left school with two low-key A levels, which was considered pretty good. Not many girls here got any A levels at all, and if she had had more encouragement she would have made it to university, but no one admitted that.

Three weeks after she arrived home her father asked her casually over breakfast one morning, 'Have you any idea what you'd like to do with yourself?'

'I thought I might take a secretarial course when the Polytechnics open in October,' she told him, 'and they need help at the local play-school.'

'Good,' her father had said. 'Capital.'

That was what her mother said too, applauding the idea. 'A secretarial course is always useful, and Philip can always find you a little job in the office, can't you, darling?' They rarely referred to each other as Mother and Father, and neither cared very much what Philippa did so long as she seemed content and didn't disrupt their own pleasant existence.

She didn't disturb them. When her parents were at home these days she was always there too, but it was a large house and she was never underfoot. On ordinary days they hardly noticed her, and when there was company she kept out of the way.

The Sorrels were well known for their hospitality; they gave great parties, and their friends ranged from county set to show biz, but

neither her mother nor her father made any move to include Philippa. They had guests who had been coming to the house for years and had never set eyes on her. Looking at Fleur many people believed that her daughter must still be a child.

Philippa took her secretarial course and acquired creditable speeds in shorthand and typing. She also acquired boy-friends, but as soon as she took them home they fell under Fleur's spell and after that they seemed to look at Philippa with a kind of pity, so that she dropped them before they could drop her. The boys were all students at the Polytechnic and, according to Fleur, most unsuitable anyway.

Philippa had liked them, she still liked them, but none of them was interested enough to persevere when she backed out. There were no hard feelings, no real feelings at all except that, deep down, her self-esteem took another knock.

There was no special man in her life now, and that didn't surprise her. She had a low opinion of her own sex appeal.

Sometimes now she helped in her father's office, where everything connected with the estate was dealt with. That was already fully staffed, the agent's wife was his secretary, but sometimes there was work that Philippa could do. In the afternoons she did voluntary work, helping in the village play-school.

She was kept busy, and she was quite satisfied with her life, but last week she had been sitting in a window seat, screened by a long damask curtain, reading a book, when her mother and father had come into the room, talking about her.

She had heard her mother's bell-clear voice asking, 'What about John Bailey?' and her father's reply,

'He's forty if he's a day. I don't want a son-in-law older than I am.'

Philip Sorrel was forty-one, but like his wife he neither admitted nor looked his age. Philippa had frozen as her mother said acidly, 'With Philippa, my darling, we can hardly be choosy. If she isn't a born spinster I never saw one.'

Her father had sighed his rueful agreement, and after a moment or two Fleur had gone on, 'There's always young Edmund.'

'He's not overbright, is he?'

'Neither is Philippa,' said Fleur, and behind the curtain Philippa nodded, as though she was playing up for her schoolmates again. Even when no one could see her she wouldn't admit to hurt.

Edmund Buff-Harrington was a younger son of a neighbouring farming and fox-hunting family. Philippa had known him all her life and had never found one single point of contact. The idea of marrying him was appalling, she would a hundred times rather remain a spinster, but it seemed that her parents weren't allowing that if there was any chance of a 'suitable' marriage.

They must have decided that Philippa was never going to make a swinger or a successful career woman, so she had better be married off. Fleur and Philip Sorrel's daughter couldn't be a complete flop or it might reflect on them.

'Edmurifr will be here for the party next week,' Fleur had mused, 'and Philippa must put in an appearance. I'd better try to find a dress that does something for her.'

Philip had chuckled, 'You'll have your work cut out,' and they had both laughed, her mother and her father.

It had been too late by then to step from behind the curtain and say 'I don't want to marry Edmund. I think I'd prefer John Bailey, although

he's more than twice my age and running to fat, and I couldn't stand marrying him either.'

She should have shown herself sooner. Right away. Now she had eavesdropped and both of them would be angry with her, her mother savagely so. Fleur Sorrel couldn't stand being caught off balance, she liked to preserve her beautiful poise. She would have said something cutting like, 'Darling child, you have such abysmal taste in men—those two weedy specimens you dredged up from somewhere, and the one who tried to touch us for half a garage—that we're frankly terrified you might marry the first lout who asks you.'

No one had asked Philippa—her parents knew that. And one of her student boy-friends had wanted to buy a partnership in a garage and had suggested that Philip Sorrel might finance him. Her mother wouldn't hesitate to remind her of that, so Philippa stayed where she was for another half hour that seemed much longer, while her father read a newspaper and her mother talked about a play for television, in which she had just been offered a role.

It had been written by Kern McCabe, a best-selling writer, and Fleur was thrilled, bubbling with enthusiasm, sounding and looking like a girl, while her daughter sat still and hidden, feeling stiff and cramped and old.

When she did get out of that room Philippa went for a long walk through the gloaming of a beautiful evening, but it didn't really help. When she came back she didn't feel much better.

Later she was told that she would be expected to be at the party on Friday night. She didn't have to talk so long as she listened, and laughed when others were witty and didn't act bored. 'Edmund asked particularly if you were going to be there,' her father told her, quite untruthfully, she knew, 'so don't ignore him, there's a good girl, he's a decent enough young fellow ...'

The pre-school play-group was held in the village scout hut, and run by a couple of young mothers who were glad of Philippa's help. She got on well with the children, and with Ellen and Lulu, and she spent the afternoon of the party day there, immersing herself in energetic activities.

The children were brought in from surrounding villages too, usually by working mothers, and they were a noisy, lovable bunch, full of beans and mischief. There were upward of twenty of them, aged from three to five, and at the end of the day Philippa and Ellen and Lulu were usually exhausted.

That morning Philippa had had her hair set in a casual waving style, parted at the side and curled under. It had looked pretty, but by now it was flopping again, and when she got back home she would have to put it into heated rollers or something and try to revive it.

She didn't want to go to the party and be thrown into Edmund's reluctant arms. She would hate it, and of course he wasn't going to ask her to marry him. As she bustled about, gathering up books and modelling clay and paints and toys, at the end of the session, she envied Ellen and Lulu, who were poor and happily married and living nice normal uncomplicated lives.

The children were being collected now. Mothers were thronging in. Paddy Riley's mum came for him, off the bus from town where she worked in a supermarket, and Paddy, who was in slight disgrace, having been involved in a punch-up with two other mini- toughs, also aged four, went towards her warily.

But nobody informed on him, and his mother took his hand and told Philippa, 'My Jack'll call for the horse tonight, if that's all right.'

It was a rocking horse from the attics of Philippa's home. Her father had said the play-school might have it, and Mr. Riley was going to restore and repaint it.

'Lovely. Thank you,' said Philippa. 'Bye, Paddy.' She loved all the youngsters, and she had a specially soft spot for Paddy Riley, whose freckled face and bright red hair could usually be spotted in the thick of any upheaval. But who was irresistibly disarming for all that.

'Has he behaved himself today?' his mother asked, and was told, 'Yes,' by Lulu, who gave the word an undercurrent of meaning so that Mrs. Riley tutted and Lulu and Philippa laughed.

Philippa walked across fields to her home, instead of along the road, past the lodge, and up the drive lined with box hedges cut in identical oblong shapes. The house was Georgian style but was actually Victorian. Inside it was a mixture of old and new, showing Fleur's taste and flair everywhere, a perfect setting for her.

Philippa slipped in by a side door, and up to her room, keeping away from the rooms where she would be likely to see her mother until she had tried to do something with her hair.

The guests would be arriving around eight o'clock, so there was plenty of time. Not that time would make much difference to Philippa's impact. Whatever she did she would still end up looking like a corn dolly.

The beige silk dress hung limply in her wardrobe and she put heated rollers in her hair, although she knew from experience that when she took out the rollers and began to brush her hair the bounce would subside. It did, and she tried pinning it back when it promptly slid out of the slide.

'Oh, please yourself,' she shrugged, and left it in its usual style of fringe and short straight bob, fair and fly-away.

Downstairs everything would be ready for the party, including a super bullet meal. Everything organised to run smoothly so that everyone would have a great time. And good luck to them, she hoped they would, but tonight she would be expected to stay down there until all the guests had gone home, and when would that be? One o'clock? Two? Three? She didn't even know what time parties in her home usually finished, because she had never stayed till the end of one before. Usually she didn't put in an appearance at all, but this one was a marriage mart, with her mother determined to interest Edmund in her.

Philippa knew she was a disappointment to her parents in everything, but after the party tonight they would tell her so, in words, spelling out how useless and hopeless she was, and she could see no chance of avoiding that scene. She could offer to leave home, find digs and a job for herself and keep away if they wanted her to. But probably they weren't prepared to tolerate a drop-out daughter either.

The only comfort was that they were off to the South of France on Sunday, to holiday with friends, so if Philippa could weather their wrath till then she would have a few weeks' grace ahead.

Meanwhile the party must go on.

She was crossing the landing to a bathroom when she glanced down into the hall below and saw a flash of red hair, the identical colour of Paddy Riley's thatch, and remembered that Mr. Riley was coming to collect the rocking horse.

She leaned over the banister and called down 'Hello' and the man looked up at her. 'Good,' she said, 'you've come for the horse. It's up here, could you give me a hand getting it down, please?'

He was a rugged-looking individual, in fact he looked tough as old boots, although he was well dressed, in a light tweed suit and a thin

brown polo-necked shirt, and the thought flashed through Philippa's mind that he had a nice smile. But he wasn't exactly smiling. It was more a raised eyebrow and an inquiring expression. 'A *horse*!' he said.

'You are Mr. Riley?'

He shook his head, and she was sharply aware of his eyes on her. She was dressed in a housecoat that buttoned from throat to ankle, revealing nothing, and yet she felt even more conscious than usual of her deficiencies. Small and ordinary, and wishing that she had the effect on men that her mother had. No man had ever gasped at first sight of Philippa.

'I'm sorry.' She backed away from the banister. 'I was expecting the father of one of the children from the play-school. I'm sorry.'

'Hey!' he called, and she could still see him down in the hall. 'About this horse--'

'The rocking horse?'

He grinned then, and it was a nice smile. It crinkled wrinkles around his eyes and showed strong even teeth. 'What else?' he said.

He was a big man whom she had never seen before, but who was probably a guest come early to the party. If he was a friend of her parents he had to be Somebody.

She had already made enough of a fool of herself and she tried to sound blase. 'I thought I'd said it was a rocking horse. Paddy Riley has red hair, you see, and from up here I thought you were his father.'

He laughed, 'Good job they don't judge paternity cases from up there,' and she stammered, flustered, 'Paddy's hair's the same colour as yours, and his father's coming round, so I thought—you're sure you're

not--' The lunacy of the words slipping off her tongue silenced her then, and she wished herself a hundred miles away.

'Fairly sure, yes,' said the man in the hall below, still smiling, and as she turned and fled she heard a door open and her mother's welcoming seductive tones.

'Kern, how lovely! Bless you for coming early.'

So that was who he was, Kern McCabe, the man in whose TV play her mother would be appearing in a few months' time. She was taking the script on holiday with her. She said it was marvellous and a marvellous part.

Philippa began to run her bath, undressing, reflecting as she viewed her reflection in the mirrored wall tiles that anyone with a grain of sense would have tried to curl her hair after her bath, not before it. Her mother's hair waved naturally. It was thick and lustrous, and even when she had been swimming and it was soaking wet she could shake her head and her hair would fall beautifully into place.

'Why don't you get yourself a wig?' Philippa asked her reflection. 'And while you're about it get yourself a yashmak as well.'

She slid into the warm scented water, and hoped that Kern MacCabe wouldn't say anything to her mother about Philippa asking him to help her get a horse downstairs, and was he sure he wasn't Paddy Riley's father. It was a doomed hope. Of course he would, because it was funny, and her mother would peal with laughter. 'Dear Philippa,' her mother would say, 'she isn't over-bright.'

Kern MacCabe was bright. He wrote the kind of books the Sunday newspapers reviewed and the dailies serialised. Books that were regularly on display in Top Ten Titles. Philippa had read some of them; the latest was about life on an oil rig, where he'd lived and

worked for six months, and it made fascinating reading and she had found it terrifying.

There was a tap on the door, and Mrs. Jarvis the housekeeper informed her that a Mr. Riley was downstairs. 'I'll be right down,' Philippa called. She scrambled into clothes and hurried to greet the genuine Mr. Riley this time.

He had red hair too, and Paddy's freckles and snub nose. McCabe didn't seem to have freckles, from what she had seen, and his nose was a long way from snub, and if it hadn't been for that hair there wouldn't have been any resemblance between him and Paddy. Oh dear, thought Philippa, I do put my foot in it, and oh, I do wish I didn't have to go to this party!

The rocking horse was carried down the backstairs and into Mr. Riley's van, and she went up to her room again and put on her party dress. She delayed going down as long as she dared, but she was surprised that her mother came looking for her. She couldn't remember that ever happening before, but the bedroom door opened and Fleur swept in, and Philippa scrambled from the chair in which she was comfortably sprawled.

'Come *on*,' said Fleur irritably. 'They're all arriving. Edmund's here.'

She was wearing black velvet and pearls, a dowager combination, but not the way Fleur Sorrel wore it. Hers was a starkly simple dress, ankle-length, with crossed straps at the back and deep cleavage almost to the waist. The pearls were a single perfect rope and she wore pearls and diamonds on her fingers. No colour, but for her amber eyes and dark red hair, and warm honey-gold skin and coral lips. She looked stunning, almost worth all the time, trouble and money.

She frowned faintly when she looked at Philippa. 'I thought you had your hair done this morning.'

'That was this morning,' said Philippa, and Fleur made an effort not to frown deeper because it seemed that Philippa might be going to be difficult. She could be tiresomely flippant at times, and Fleur would have been indignant at the suggestion that Philippa's flippancy might cover loneliness. Fleur considered that she and Philip had done everything for their daughter they could be expected to do.

Philippa had lacked for nothing. When she had been away at school it had been simple; now, as Philip had said last week, a suitable marriage might be a good thing. Fleur had agreed, but every time she was forced to admit that Philippa was no longer a child it irritated her. She felt, somehow, that Philippa too should have kept the years at bay.

The guests were certainly arriving. The big drawing room was almost full, and as Philippa followed her mother in she thought, with this crowd they can't keep a full-time watch on me. They won't be able to see me half the time.

She saw Kern McCabe, half way across the room. His red hair stood out, and he was tall, and he had a group around him, so he would have been hard to miss. But he spotted her too, the moment she stepped through the door, and just walked away from the others and came over.

'Hello,' he said.

'Hello,' Philippa echoed, and waited for the joke that would have her mother laughing, but he only said,

'My name's McCabe, Kern McCabe. Who are you?' as though they hadn't met before but he wanted to meet her now. And she knew he hadn't told anyone about Paddy Riley and the rocking horse.

Fleur said, 'This is Philippa, our daughter,' and he didn't look surprised—well, he wouldn't be would he? he must have guessed—but Fleur was rather put out because she took it for granted that anyone to whom she introduced Philippa would say, 'I don't believe it.' Then Fleur could tell them, 'I was practically a child bride.'

Now she said, 'Kern, there are so many people you simply must meet,' and took his arm. To Philippa she said, 'Go and talk to Edmund darling. He's over there with your father.'

Reluctantly Philippa made her way to her father and Edmund. She wouldn't have chosen Edmund as a companion, but she would have talked to him and listened to him willingly enough from common courtesy if she hadn't overheard her parents' plan. Now there was the awful embarrassment of suspecting that he might know what they were up to. Her father could have had a word with his father—perhaps offering to provide a dowry with Philippa. An old-fashioned idea, but certainly an inducement.

Edmund was a round-faced, healthy young man in his mid-twenties, and he greeted Philippa cheerfully. As it happened he hadn't a clue that he was being considered as a son-in-law by the Sorrels; there had been no more discussion on the matter than that Philippa had overheard. Philip Sorrel was being affable to him, but neither Philip nor Fleur were going to involve themselves beyond affability to Edmund and urging Philippa to exert herself.

They weren't risking a rebuff, and they weren't paying out to buy Philippa a husband, and, although it would be convenient if she married, Fleur at least was convinced that their daughter would remain a spinster.

The party went with a swing, everybody seemed to be having a good time, and Philippa kept smiling and lost count of the times she heard, 'You're Philippa?' in astonished tones. She felt that some of them

could hardly have been more surprised if she had had two heads, but that was probably a jaundiced outlook.

She also felt that the beige silk dress had been a mistake, and when her mother said, 'Why don't you take Edmund to see the lily pond?' it was so obvious they were being thrown together that Philippa cringed with embarrassment. But Edmund didn't seem to notice. 'I wouldn't mind a breath of air,' he said, and they went out from the hot noisy rooms into the quiet night, with moonlight enough to see.

Of course Edmund had seen the lily pond. He knew every inch of the gardens and grounds around the house, and they trailed in an aimless fashion round the pond, and the swimming pool, and the squash court and the stables.

Edmund's father was an M.F.H. Fleur didn't ride to hounds now. She had done in early days, but now she wouldn't risk a fall that might mark or maim her. She was a good horsewoman, but Philip Sorrel was an excellent rider.

Not Philippa, though. She hated the whole idea of the hunt, and she was only fair to middling in riding, or any other sport. 'You don't take after your father, do you?' said Edmund as they passed the stables. Most of the things Edmund said were glaringly obvious and he was boring Philippa so much that she felt glassy-eyed.

'Nope,' she said.

'You don't take after your mother either.' He was sympathising with her there, it was a shame she didn't. His voice was tinged with wonder. 'She's a marvel, isn't she? She seems to get younger every time I see her.'

'She does get younger,' said Philippa. 'At the rate I'm catching up I'll be older than she is in another five years.'

Edmund laughed obligingly, but they both knew that sisters seemed a likelier relationship than mother and daughter, with Fleur as the radiant beauty and Philippa as the girl born to be overshadowed. 'They're something, your parents,' said Edmund, and Philippa agreed. They *were* splendid, and she had had years to get used to the fact that they had very little time or feeling for her.

Under the great oak tree, where the gardens turned into copse, Edmund reached for Philippa's hand. He wasn't too bright, but he did know that under moonlight girls usually expected to be kissed, and he said, 'You're really very sweet, Philippa.'

'That's such a comfort to me,' she murmured ironically, and when he tried to take her in his arms she sidestepped and stood with her back to the tree. 'Do you know what I'd like?' she said. 'I'd love a long cool drink. Please, would you fetch me something with a little lime and a lot of fizz in it?'

'Oh! Well, all right,' he said obligingly, and she watched him go down the little slope towards the lawn and the house with a sigh of relief. Getting rid of Edmund was like taking off tight shoes and she honestly didn't think she could stay here and wait for his return.

Movement behind her made her whirl around, and there was Kern McCabe, looming very large, and even in the moonlight his hair was still red. 'Passionate type, isn't he?' said McCabe.

Philippa began to laugh. He must have been the other side of the tree and from what he had heard he would know how lukewarm Edmund's pass had been. 'Only when he's chasing foxes,' she said. 'What are you doing out here?'

'Walking around. Join me? Or did you really want that drink?'

'No, and I don't think I'll wait. Unless someone reminds Edmund he'll probably forget where he left me.' He slipped her hand through his

arm, and she wasn't embarrassed or surprised. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that she should be strolling arm in arm with this strange man, under the moonlight, between the trees.

'He looked like the kind of bloke who could forget his own name,' said McCabe.

'Oh *no*!' She shook her head and pretended to sound shocked. 'The family's had it such a long time. He might forget what day it was, but he'd never forget he's a Buff-Harrington.'

'It'd take some forgetting.' He was very big, he should have been clumsy, but he walked surefooted, and his arm beneath her fingers gave her a sense of deep security, as though she would never stumble while she could hold on to him. 'I thought that was a hen,' he said.

She giggled, keeping the laughter quiet although it was bubbling in her like champagne. 'Buff Orpington,' she said, and he shrugged,

'Where's the difference? He'd make a good hen, if hens chased foxes. What were you doing with him out here in the dark?'

'Absolutely nothing.' They were coming to the fencing of the paddock. 'My mother sent us out, she's trying to marry me off to Edmund,' said Philippa, and it had stopped being a shameful secret she could share with no one and become something to laugh at.

McCabe gave a great hoot of laughter, 'Philippa Buff-Harrington!' and she seated herself on the fence, tucking her feet under, laughing with him.

'It doesn't sound quite right, does it?'

'You'd never be able to sign a cheque and keep a straight face.' He leaned against the fence beside her, looking out across the paddock,

asking, 'Why is she trying to marry you off? It's a bit old hat, matchmaking mothers.'

'They can't think what else to do with me,' she explained.

'Come off it.' He sounded both amused and impatient. 'You're not going to stand for that?'

He had an interesting profile: a big nose that was almost aquiline except for the slight bump on the bridge where it might once had been broken, a long mouth, and a jaw that matched the rest of him. Philippa studied his profile and thought she would remember it. 'No need to panic,' she said lightly. 'Edmund isn't going to ask me to marry him.'

'You sound very sure.'

'Sure as God made little apples.'

He turned from the survey of the paddock to look at her, so close that their shoulders brushed and she could feel his breath on her cheek. 'What would you do if he did?' he asked.

Decline, of course. She had thought about marriage, discussed it with her friends—the girls, not the men— but when she had heard her mother describe her as a born old maid she had thought that being Edmund's wife would be a deal more boring.

But that didn't mean her mother was right. She felt the oddest sensation now, a soft sweet stirring of the flesh. For the first time she wanted a man to kiss her— this man. If he had done she was sure it would have been the most enjoyable thing that had ever happened to her. But when he didn't she moved a few inches farther away along the fence so that he shouldn't suspect she wanted him to kiss her.

'I'd say no, thank you,' she said. 'But there's no danger. Who'd want to marry a corn dolly?'

'Now you've lost me.'

'Me, in this dress.' She was fooling at her own expense again. 'That's what my mother said.' She mimicked Fleur's cool derision, 'My God, darling, you look like a corn dolly!' As he made no immediate comment she began to explain, 'Don't you know them? Spiky straw things.' She stuck out spiky fingers, her elbows stiff by her side, sitting very straight on top of the fence. 'They used to make them at harvest time, and keep them till the next harvest.'

'I know what a corn dolly is.' He grinned at her. 'A fertility symbol.'

Philippa's stiffness melted and she laughed. 'So it is, but I don't think that's what my mother meant. And I suppose I'd better be getting back.'

He lifted her off the fence and set her on her feet, as her name came faintly through the night air from the spot where Edmund had left her. 'Your lime juice and soda, ma'am,' said Kern McCabe.

If she didn't gather Edmund up her parents would be annoyed. She said, 'It's hardly fair to leave him wandering all alone in the dark with only a cold drink for company.'

'Great sense of fair play you've got. All right, we'll collect him.' They went back, retracing their steps, and when Edmund's plaintive cries were loud enough to mean he was near McCabe stopped and said quietly, 'I don't go along with him. I wouldn't say you were "really a very sweet girl, Philippa".'

Edmund had thought he was being complimentary, but what he had meant was that she was inoffensive, a girl who disturbed nobody. She supposed she always had been. Up to now.

'What would you say I was?' she asked, and McCabe looked down at her so searchingly that she couldn't meet his eyes. For no reason she could think of she had to look away.

'I don't know yet,' he said at last. 'But I tell you this, I'm going to find out.'

CHAPTER TWO

EDMUND BUFF-HARRINGTON was annoyed that Philippa had not waited where he'd left her. Wandering off with another man was not what he'd expected from Philippa, and Kern McCabe made him uneasy. He wouldn't have cared to tangle with McCabe, so he only glared at Philippa when he said, 'I've been looking for you. I thought you wanted this drink.'

'Thank you,' said Philippa, and took the tall glass from him. He had spilt some of the contents, stumbling about in the dark. There wasn't much left in the glass and she swallowed a little and thanked him again.

They walked to the house, with Edmund, still huffy, lagging behind, and when they went in Philippa was telling Kern that the genuine Mr. Riley had turned up with freckles and a snub nose. 'So you're in the clear,' she said. 'He's Paddy's father all right.'

Kern was laughing as they came through the French windows, and Philip Sorrel, standing near, raised both eyebrows and asked, 'Where's Edmund? He took a drink out for you.'

She was holding the glass, and almost at once Edmund appeared, and Philip gave McCabe an apologetic look. 'I hope the child hasn't been pestering you.'

'Why, there you are, Kern.' Fleur bore down on them, and again took Kern away, and Philippa wanted to say, 'I'm nearly twenty. I've had the vote for two years.' If Kern had looked back she might have said something like that, but someone was talking to him, and one of her mother's actress friends was leaning on his shoulder, and by Philippa Edmund was demanding,

'Where did he come from? What was he doing out there?'

'Taking the air I suppose, like us,' said Philippa.

'Don't care much for his books myself,' said Edmund.

'How many have you read?' asked Philippa, conscious of a rising surge of irritation herself. Why should she be expected to listen to Edmund all evening? He *bored* her, and right then, for almost the first time, she began to consider herself. Maybe she wasn't the marvel her mother was, but she had to be more than a hole in the air for Kern McCabe to be intrigued by her. What he had said before he left her was as good as saying he would be seeing her again.

She hadn't the confidence to go over to him now, pushing herself into the group of show-biz personalities in this stupid dress that didn't do a thing for her. But she was not going to be patronised by Edmund any more, even if her parents were furious with her. And why should he be lumbered with her? Give the lad a break, she thought. Let him go and find someone who'll talk about hunting.

She moved around among the guests, and of course Edmund didn't follow. The guests were over their surprise now that she was Philip and Fleur's daughter, and it wasn't so difficult to merge in. They were all enjoying themselves, and so did Philippa, rather to her surprise, although she knew she would have to face some questioning later.

Her mother had demanded, crossly and quietly, 'Why aren't you talking to Edmund?' and Philippa had said,

“'We've talked. I think he's said all he's got to say.'”

Fleur had sighed and gone over to Philip, who had listened to her whisper and shrugged, murmuring, 'What can I do? I can't lock them up together. When welcome back we'll have a smaller party, half a dozen to dinner. Although I must say I'm surprised to see Philippa circulating.'

Fleur played with her perfect row of pearls, her amber eyes following her daughter. 'It's probably the wine. She isn't used to it. She thinks she's the belle of the ball. Good lord, now she's making for Kern! You'd better put a stop to that, he'll eat her alive.'

'She's too green for his taste,' said Philip cynically, and as they watched Philippa turned away.

She had thought she would speak to Kern, that was really why she was moving around, so that she could come up against him and say, 'Hello again,' but the moment she was near enough to speak something like shyness seized her. Only like shyness, because it made her turn away and hurry across to somebody on the other side of the room. But it was less shyness than caution, as though she heard a warning note against showing her feelings openly. She knew instinctively that her parents would think it ridiculous and pathetic, Philippa imagining Kern McCabe was interested in her.

Besides, if she talked to Kern here she would be surrounded by wittier prettier women. So she would wait until he got in touch. And he would some time, she knew he would.

He was one of the first to leave. When he did come across to her it was to say goodbye, and he took his leave of a whole bunch at the same time so that she wasn't sure whether she imagined that his eyes held hers for that fraction longer. She would have gone out to his car with him if her father hadn't been with him, and as the two men left the room the party ended for Philippa. The excitement went out of it.

Until then she had been on tiptoe with excitement, because Kern was here and every time she glimpsed him, or heard his voice, she felt happy and scared. Longing for him to come over to her, but afraid that he might. A crazy, heady mixture of emotions that kept her constantly on the move, and so bright-eyed and pink-cheeked that she looked a different girl from her pallid everyday self.

After Kern had gone it was still a good party, but Philippa wanted to get away. She wasn't tired, but she wanted to be alone, so she slipped out when no one was watching and went up to her room.

If she was missed it was after midnight and her parents would probably accept the excuse of a headache. Her mother had already said, 'Darling, I think you've had enough to drink,' and that was funny, as Philippa had drunk so little.

But her mind was whirling, and she kicked off her shoes and lay on the bed, her flushed cheek against the cool silk of the coverlet. She had met a man who had made a tremendous impression on her. The boys she had met till now had only been friends, not even close friends. She hadn't been able to talk to them about anything that mattered to her, but tonight with Kern McCabe she had felt she could have told him anything.

She could remember the hardness of his arm beneath her fingers, the brush of his shoulder, strong hands lifting her down from that fence. Every fleeting touch was vivid in her mind, stirring her now so that she closed her eyes, as a warm heavy lethargy stole over her. She had dreamed of a lover before, of course, but until now her dreams had never had a recognisable face.

It was like magic, but she was almost sure that this was love, and he had felt the rapport between them too. And he would come back, and tomorrow everyone who looked at her would see how she had changed. She had to be beautiful because he had to fall in love with her...

' When she woke she was not beautiful. The dream of the ugly duckling opening her eyes a swan had gone, but what remained was almost as marvellous. Even in the clear light of morning she knew that she had met a« immensely attractive man who had found her

attractive, and nothing as thrilling as that had ever happened to her before.

Her parents emerged from their separate bedrooms, and when her mother came downstairs, in a pale blue Thai silk kimono, and asked wearily, 'I suppose Edmund said nothing about seeing you again?' Philippa's 'No,' was meek and misleading, because she wasn't feeling meek. She was feeling triumphant with her secret, and tomorrow her parents would be off on holiday so there would be no questions asked about what she was doing. If Kern came, only Philippa would be here.

Philippa had known that luck was with her today, and when the phone rang neither her mother nor her father was near a receiver. So that proved it, because Philippa answered the phone and it was Kern. Several people had phoned already to say thank you for the party, but he said 'Philippa?' so it was her he wanted to talk to.

She recognised his voice as he said her name, and broke into a beatific smile. He couldn't see she was smiling at him, but her happiness couldn't be contained. It was all she could do to speak quietly instead of whooping with joy.

'Yes. It is Kern, isn't it?'

'Yes. Are you doing anything this afternoon?'

'No. Why?' If she had been she would have cancelled it, and whatever he suggested was going to be the thing she wanted to do most: mountaineering, deep sea diving, running away to a desert island.

'I wondered if you'd like to come to the races,' he said.

'Yes, I would,' she said promptly.

'Right, I'll collect you around one.'

Some of her dizziness evaporated, and she said, 'I have some letters to post. Do you know the post office? It's on the green. Would you pick me up there?'

'Yes, of course.'

She put down the phone very gently, but no one came to see who had been calling. She wouldn't have told them. She would have said 'A friend of mine. No one you know.' Because if her father and mother found out they would spoil it.

There was no reason why she shouldn't go out with Kern McCabe. He was successful, unmarried, not that much older than Edmund. If he wanted her for a friend they would put no obstacle in the way, except that of utter incredulity. They wouldn't believe it. They would say he had to be doing this out of kindness, perhaps as repayment for their hospitality. They would make her feel that no man like that could really want to go around with her, undermining her fragile confidence so that when Kern came she would be shy and stupid.

Later she wouldn't care, when they were really friends, but this was a first date and she could hardly believe her luck, and she was taking no chances at this stage.

The weather could have been better. It wasn't raining, but there were dark scudding clouds, so she put on a white macintosh over a navy jumper and skirt, tied a yellow scarf around her throat for a touch of colour, and wore navy T-strap shoes with a flattish heel. It was the races she was going to, not a candlelit dinner, but she wished she had had something smarter, slicker. She wished she was eight inches taller and looked like her mother, so that when she was with Kern this afternoon people would look at her and ask each other, 'Who *is* that?'

The post office was one of the village's three shops. A post office, a grocer's and a butcher's, still the old- fashioned shiny-tiled frontage of

fifty years ago. The post office also sold newspapers, toys and haberdashery, and after she had bought half a dozen stamps Philippa loitered among the magazines until she saw Kern's car drawing up outside.

His flash of red hair alerted her and she ran from the post office almost before the car had stopped. He got out and her heart went on flipping and she stood still, delighted to find she hadn't been dazzled by the moonlight last night. He wasn't exactly handsome, he had none of the smooth agelessness of her father, but he was ruggedly attractive, with a maleness and a virility that would turn any woman's head. Most of the shoppers coming out of the grocer's and the butcher's were looking his way, and a couple of customers in the post office practically had their noses flattened on the window pane.

He looked at Philippa, he didn't seem to see anyone else. 'I'm glad you could make it,' he said.

'I'm glad you phoned me.' It was a super car, and she settled into her seat, blissfully comfortable and sorry the racecourse was only a five-mile run away. She would have liked to be driving for the rest of the day, through towns and villages, up and down hills, until dusk fell and the stars and the moon came out, as they had done last night. And then the car would stop, somewhere quiet where no one could find them, at a little house or a small hotel.

That was one daydream she had better keep to herself. She blushed at the idiocy of it and breathed deep and tried to look composed.

There was perfume in here, fresh enough to identify if you knew the brand. Philippa didn't, but she knew that it certainly wasn't aftershave. If her mother hadn't had her own perfume specially blended it was the kind she might have used, a sharpness with a haunting undertone of sweetness, very, very expensive, Philippa had no doubt.

Someone wearing this perfume had sat in this car only a little while ago, and Philippa turned the air duct towards her face to blow it away because it was silly to be jealous of a perfume, like hating a shadow. She didn't know who the girl was, and she didn't want to know. I'm here now, she thought, and nothing is going to spoil this afternoon for me, and why shouldn't his mother, or his sister, or someone he gave a lift to, use this scent?

She said gaily, 'I know why you're taking me to the races.' They came from the lane that circled the village into the fairly busy road that led to the town and the racecourse. 'Of course you do,' said Kern.

'To bring you luck. Corn dollies are lucky.'

This car could have overtaken the three that were ahead, but the road was winding here and there was plenty of time. They were cruising, leisured and warm and lazy, and his grin was slow. 'So they say,' he said, 'but I wanted you along because I fancy you.'

She thought that her laughter hid her surprised delight as the blush came up again across her cheeks, but he asked, 'Why should that surprise you?'

'I don't get fancied much. That's the price of having such a beautiful mother and not getting the same face.' She grimaced for him, although he was watching the road, not her. 'I'm the seconds,' she said cheerfully. 'My mother's the quality goods.'

He took the first straight stretch of road and purred into the lead, then he said, 'I'm glad you got the face you did. And there's nothing second rate about it.'

Philippa touched her face instinctively. No one had ever said that before. No one could prefer her looks to her mother's, but no one had even pretended to, and Kern hadn't made it sound like flattery. 'Do you really mean that?' She tried to keep smiling, but when he said,

'I don't say what I don't mean,' she gulped and blinked, because that was the nicest thing she had ever heard.

Of course she wasn't ugly, she knew that. It was just that her parents were so outstanding. But her nose was quite nice and so were her teeth, and there was nothing wrong with her skin except that it was pale. And so long as she was with Kern she was special.

They passed a clump of trees so that for a moment the light lessened, and the car window showed a fleeting mirror image of herself as a smiling stranger. Of course she wasn't ugly, and every day in every way she was going to get prettier. The glow was there, just under her skin.

The stream of traffic grew heavier as they neared the racecourse, so that in the end they were moving at snail's pace, but the threatening rain had kept down the crowds and there was easy parking.

Philippa looked around as she got out of the car. She wasn't wanting familiar faces, but if anyone did see her who knew her it was unlikely they'd bother to mention it to her parents before tomorrow, and by then the Sorrels would be far away. Her father often went to the races, but he was busy in the office this afternoon.

'Do you come here often?' she asked Kern.

'From time to time. I'm not strictly a racing man.' He got into a trenchcoat and took her arm, and they went through the gates into the racecourse.

He knew a lot of people. Men and women were coming up to him all the time, many of them wearing little Owner/Trainer badges in their lapels. Most of these knew her father and some of them recognised Philippa, but today she wasn't the Sorrels' daughter, she was the girl with Kern McCabe, and that was very different. Today she looked as though she was enjoying life.

He knew the jockeys too, and introduced her to everyone who didn't know her, and they all seemed pleased to see her. There were even a few flatteringly raised eyebrows.

'Very nice,' said one jockey, resplendent in red and black polka dot satin shirt and scarlet cap, 'but you're more my size than his, darlin'. We'd make a good pair, how about it?'

Philippa laughed. She was only five foot tall but it didn't matter any more. She joked, 'I think I'd better stay with Kern. He's very big and he might get nasty, but I tell you what, I'll put my money on you.'

'That's what I like to hear,' said the jockey, 'and I never let a lady down.'

But he did this time, coming in fourth, and Kern said, 'That'll teach you to fall for the blarney!'

The weather deteriorated into a fine drizzle, but she had a lovely time. Kern backed on form, knowing the horses and what they were expected to do, which sometimes they did, so that he made a modest overall profit. But Philippa hung over the fencing of the paddock, selecting as the mood took her.

'That one, please,' she said, pointing to a chestnut horse whose flanks rippled like fluid silk.

'Why?' asked Kern. 'I know, you like the colour scheme.' The jockey walking beside the animal was in a purple shirt with yellow striped sleeves, very striking, but Philippa said with pretended gravity,

'Now that *would* be a stupid way to go about it. No, I think the horse has kind eyes.'

She had never talked nonsense like this with a man before. She had never felt at ease in male company like this. Kern leaned with his

back to the fence beside her, as though they were having a serious discussion. 'The ones with the kind eyes aren't the winners,' he told her.

He had grey eyes and he was a winner, but this was fooling. 'That's still my horse,' said Philippa. 'What's his name?'

'Plessy Mordaunt.'

'Really? I wonder why. Which is yours?'

'The one with blinkers on.'

'He could have mean eyes.'

'I'm backing him to win on form, but if he's mean so much the better.'

It was a bunched up race, a field of ten more or less evenly matched, battling so closely that it was hard to distinguish them, until they started the long swing out of the far straight and jockeys and horses went full out. Then the ones with the edge began to draw slowly ahead.

Philippa watched hers among the leaders, and began cheering and calling, 'Come on, Plessy, come on, come *on* 1' jumping up and down in the wet grass at the white rails. Almost everyone else was urging on their own favourite, and she was having such fun, and as they took the final turn for the last quarter mile up to the line it was Plessy and blinkers going together, and she grabbed Kern's arm. 'Mine's going to win, mine's going to win!'

A third horse was less than half a length behind, and at the winning post it was a photo-finish, with Philippa shouting herself hoarse and Plessy Mordaunt coming in by a nose.

When the results came over the loudspeaker she almost flung herself into Kern's arms, but hesitated in the moment of turning from listening to the disembodied voice of the announcer. Kern was grinning, although his horse had lost he was enjoying her rapturous enjoyment, but years of rejection checked her impulsiveness and she clasped her outflung hands together. 'I won, didn't I?' she smiled.

'Kind eyes made it.' He hugged her and she snuggled close, laughing, conscious of the hard-muscled body against her, feeling safe and strong, one of the winners now.

They made their way to the car park in drizzling rain after the last race, passing a couple who had had a drink with them earlier. Friends of Kern's who also knew Philippa's parents. When they were out of earshot the man said to his wife, 'Philip Sorrel's girl's improved. She isn't another Fleur, of course, but she's looking quite attractive today.'

'Fairly glowing.' His wife rooted around in her handbag for the car keys. 'Probably in love, but not with Kern, I hope.'

'Why not?' The man looked blank, and the woman said as though she was reminding him of something that was obvious,

'Because of Liliass Storr, idiot. Can you imagine her letting another woman move in on Kern?'

In the car Philippa looked ruefully at her muddy shoes and at the rain dripping from her macintosh. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I'm making a horrible mess.'

'Not so much as I am,' said Kern, 'my feet are bigger. Now, where do you want to go for dinner?'

She glowed warm, although her toes squelched. 'Anywhere,' she said happily, relaxing back in her seat.

'No one can say you're hard to please.' He manoeuvred the car into the exiting stream, raising a hand to someone he knew in another vehicle. 'I'll run you home first, you'll want to get out of these clothes.'

'No.' She sat upright again, speaking jerkily. 'If you don't mind taking me out to dinner in a jumper and skirt I'd rather not go back home. I might not be able to get out again, they're leaving on holiday in the morning, my mother might get me packing or something. It isn't very smart what I'm in, but--' her voice trailed as he looked at her, his gaze quick and searching.

Her reasons for not going home first must sound odd, but she couldn't say, 'If they see us together the spell will break,' and then he said, 'You look fine to me, you can dry off at my place.'

'Thank you,' she said, 'and thank you for taking me to the races. I've had a perfectly lovely time. I didn't know watching horses run could be such fun.'

He grinned, 'Neither did I. Why haven't you come with your father? He's often around the course, isn't he?'

'Not with me.'

He understood what that meant, and Philippa said quickly because she would have hated to sound self-pitying, 'He's a marvellous father, but he wanted a son. He could have taken a boy racing and playing polo and squash and all the other things he's so good at himself.' Then to change the subject she began to hum along with the tune on the radio. 'I like this,' she said, and it was a pleasant enough song that would have a life span of a few weeks, but she liked it now because she was so happy that everything had a special magic. Even the familiar landscape sliding by in a silver drizzle of rain was strangely beautiful.

She hadn't known till now where Kern lived. Until yesterday she had known nothing about him that she hadn't read, except that her mother's next role was in his play.

He had a mews house in a country town about fifteen miles from her home village, behind a row of Regency houses that were now bed-sits and offices. The mews was cobbled, and what had been stables had become exorbitantly priced and highly desirable residences.

The door was white and steps went down into a split level dining/living/cooking area. It was modern and glossily functional, and could have been lifted straight from the pages of a colour magazine. Philippa said impulsively, 'You don't spend much time here?'

'I get around a lot, but this is my pad. What's wrong with it?' He took her coat and as his hands brushed hers she trembled.

'*Nothing.*' She hedged, embarrassed, 'It's super. How long have you lived here?'

'A few years now. I bought it lock stock and barrel from a bloke whose firm moved him to America. It does. There's everything I need. Do you need that bath?'

'Please.'

When she took a steady look at herself in the bathroom mirror it wasn't reassuring, and if she hadn't felt so good it could have reduced her to despair. The rain had washed away her make-up and flattened her hair, but it couldn't wash the shine from her eyes or the smile from her lips, and she ran hot water while she stepped out of her damp shoes and tights. At least her macintosh had kept her skirt and jumper dry, and she hung her tights over a heated towel rail.

Bells rang while she was taking a quick dip in the bathtub, and washing and towelling her hair. The phone rang twice, and what sounded like the doorbell once. She wouldn't have been surprised to find company here when she came out of the bathroom so she opened the door a crack and peered round first, and when she saw only Kern she hugged herself for joy.

'I'm pleased the man who sold you this place left the thick carpets,' she said. She came out, dressed but barefoot, her hair still wet and a towel draped round her shoulders.

Kern had changed leather shoes for suede boots. He was sitting in a black leather chrome-armed chair, with a coffee percolator and cups on a small glass-topped table, drinking coffee. He poured into the second cup as she walked across to him. 'What do you put in it?' he asked.

'Milk, please, not much.' She took the cup and sat on a matching settee, drank some of her coffee, then put down the cup, and he said,

'Come here.'

'W—why?'

'Give me the towel and I'll dry your hair.'

She took the towel to him and sat at his feet on the thick grey carpet, facing the phoney fireplace of copper canopy and glowing electric logs. As a small child a housekeeper had rubbed her hair like this in front of a nursery fire, telling her fairy tales about sleeping princesses who woke at a kiss. But that was a long, long time ago, and in the years between she had rarely been touched with tenderness. Her mother's kisses were cool and light, a theatrical embrace bestowed on anyone in greeting or parting. Boy-friends had kissed her, usually half-heartedly. Other touches had been impersonal, meaning nothing at all, but this was like being stfdked, loved, petted.

The rough softness of the towel was comforting, and the strong fingers moving lightly and rhythmically over her temples, the nape of her neck, loosening the tensions in her scalp, soothed her until she could have purred like a sleepy kitten. She did yawn, leaning back against Kern's knees, and when he said, 'Do you think it's dry?' she emerged reluctantly from under the towel, and ran her own fingers through her hair.

It was nearly dry, and there was a comb in her handbag with which she tidied it. 'That's the best I can do,' she announced, looking up from her handbag mirror.

'You look fine.' He was watching her approvingly. 'Now, where do we eat? What's your fancy? Chinese? Indian? A plain British steak? Seafood?'

'Lovely! All of them.' Her face was warmed by the fire, the towelling, the unqualified approval in his eyes. 'Somewhere with dim lights,' she joked. 'With my hair like this and no lipstick on I need a very dim light.' Laughing at herself was an old trick with her, but feeling desirable was a completely new sensation.

'Tell you what,' he leaned back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head, 'we'll stay here and turn out the lights.'

'What *are* you suggesting?' She laughed, then sobered and said uncertainly, 'Could we? Have a meal here, I mean. I'm not really dressed for going out to dinner. Could I cook something?'

'Can you cook?'

'I could make an omelette.'

'I can do better than that. We'll have tomorrow's dinner.'

He went to the kitchen section—fitted stripped pine, neatly and prettily put together—opened a fridge in matching formica and said, 'What do you know, a good plain British steak.'

Philippa looked over his shoulder—the fridge was well stocked—and asked, 'Do you always keep steaks by you?'

'I keep whatever my Mrs. Harris puts in here. Right, you lay the table and I'll get on with this.'

Everything was to hand. The dining table had four chairs around it; she took two away and set two places. Then she came back into the kitchen area to watch the grilling steaks and a bubbling pan of spaghetti. 'A plain British steak?' she said. 'What's that?' 'Quicker than chips,' said Kern.

'Do you cook for yourself?'

'When I have to.'

The kitchen looked small, but he operated as though he was in the galley of a boat, each movement deft and sure, reaching for what he wanted with no unnecessary effort. She sat on a stool and watched. 'Where do you write?' she asked.

There wasn't a desk in sight, and there were no papers or typewriter on any of the tables. 'In there,' he pointed a fork at one of three closed doors leading from the living area, and as she put a bare foot to the ground, 'Nobody goes in there.'

She jerked back her foot as though she had dipped her toe in freezing water and stammered, 'Of course, I wouldn't want to pry.'

'Sorry,' he said, 'but my filing system is mostly on the floor.'

'Are you writing anything now?'

'I'm always writing.'

'When do you write?' She wanted to know so that she could follow his day, could think—he's at his desk now, and live with him in her mind. Kern forked up a festoon of spaghetti, inspected it and returned it to the steaming water, then said,

'Usually from dawn till about midday, so don't ring me mornings will you if you can help it?'

That meant he expected her to phone him. She could call through and say 'Hello' without feeling embarrassed or pushy. 'I won't,' she promised. She added, 'I work most afternoons at the play-school—the number's Pedway 533. Shall I write it down?'

'No need,' he said, and she knew he would remember.

The steaks were good. The spaghetti and the sauce that went with it were good, and the wine glowed like rubies in big goblet glasses. Philippa sipped her wine and said, 'What is it? I like it.'

'Plonk,' said Kern. Every bottle in her father's cellar had a name, but this tasted delicious. Everything tasted delicious, even the bread.

'Then it was a good year for plonk.' She raised her glass. 'Your health.'

'Yours, Philippa.'

'Kern's an unusual name, isn't it?' she said. 'Is it short for anything?'

'Kern's what it says on the certificate.' His voice was accentless, neither county nor regional, but it had character. It was the quiet voice of a man who had never needed to shout to command attention. Everyone listened to Kern McCabe. He would be finding Philippa's concentration no novelty, but he was looking steadily at her now, with a concentration no one had ever shown her before.

She knew so little about him and yet she was sure he was the one person with whom she could happily shut out the rest of the world. While he was with her she would need no one else. But, she reflected ruefully, no one else needed her. If she vanished into thin air all she would leave would be regret. Nobody's heart would break. She asked, 'Do you have parents?'

'No.'

After a moment she ventured, 'Any relatives?'

'None.' The monosyllables were flat and final, another Keep Out notice, but before she had time to feel abashed he asked,

'How long have you been at that play-school of yours?' and she was into safe territory again.

She told him about Ellen and Lulu, about the children, the mothers. Her parents would have thought it all too dull and humdrum for words, but Kern chuckled at her account of mishaps—the time Paddy Riley painted Emma Andrews blue from head to foot in five seconds flat by emptying a jar of poster paint all over her, the day a flock of sheep came trotting into the hall in the middle of Listen With Mother.

After the meal they sat by the fire again, on the settee, and part of Philippa's mind was saying—this can't be real, I can't be here, so close to a man like this, him talking to me, listening to me. But the rest of her mind said—this is reality, everything that went before was the half life.

She had never felt so alive, so aware of quickened senses. Colours were brighter and sounds were clearer, and it was not just the light pressure of Kern's hand cupping her shoulder, and his arm along the back of the settee behind her, that she felt. It was the hem of her skirt touching his knee, a strand of her hair brushing his cheek. She felt as

close to him and as cherished as though he kissed her lips and told her he loved her.

When the doorbell rang he went to answer it and she watched, over the back of the settee, sighing softly because this would be the end of this lovely privacy. Someone else was arriving. She had been so happy today that even if the caller had been an attractive woman she wouldn't have been downcast. She was sure that Kern was attracted to her and of course she expected competition, but it was a man announcing, 'Del's run out of coffee again, can you lend us some?'

'Sure,' said Kern, and the man stepped in. He was fortyish and pleasant-looking, skin tanned, hair bleached by the sun. He followed Kern towards the kitchen area talking about a film he'd just seen which ¹ according to him was a right load of old rubbish. He put it more succinctly than that, and then spotted Philippa, briefly looked taken aback, then grinned. 'My wife thought so too,' he said. 'Sorry to barge in like this, I didn't realise you'd got company.'

Kern produced a tin of coffee from a cupboard and said, 'This is Harry from next door. Harry Lester— Philippa Sorrel.'

Harry and Philippa smiled at each other, and Harry said? 'Sorry again.'

She knew that he thought he had interrupted love- making and she was amused and secretly flattered, but Kern said quietly, 'You're on the wrong tack.'

That was all. Then Harry said, 'Well, thanks for the coffee,' and to Philippa, 'Nice meeting you, Miss Sorrel.'

As he closed the door after Harry, Kern glanced at his watch and said, 'It's about time I was running you home.'

Next door they would hear the car leave. That would preserve Philippa's reputation, although Kern had already saved it, emphasising that this was a platonic relationship. That was considerate of him, and yet she felt resentful.

She said, 'You needn't have bothered.' She got up from the settee to fetch her shoes and tights from the bathroom, her toes sinking into the carpet. 'I don't imagine I'm compromised,' she said stiffly, 'because I'm caught sitting with a friend at ten o'clock. I'm not that much of a prude.'

He was standing in front of her and she was facing him, watching the smile start, eyes first and then the lift of a corner of the mouth, and she thought in anguish—don't laugh at me.

But he didn't laugh, and somehow she was beginning to smile herself. He reached out a hand to stroke her cheek and the light touch ran through her like an electric shock.

'I don't think you're a prude, my love,' he said, 'but I do think it's high time I took you home.'

CHAPTER THREE

MY love ... my love ... my love ... All the way home the words sang in Philippa's mind. Kern set her down outside her house and she bade him goodnight softly; and that was how he kissed her, his lips warm and expert, and she would have melted into his arms and sat there till someone came out to see who was driving up at half past ten, if he hadn't reached across and opened the car door. Then she remembered that she didn't want them to know, and scrambled out of the car.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' he said.

'Yes, please, yes!' She added, 'My love,' silently, as he drove away, and then turned towards the house. Lots of the windows had lights in, but no one had come out, and Philippa went in and straight up to her room.

'Kern, my love,' she murmured, and the sound of that, said aloud, frightened her because she had never wanted anyone before like this, and she was venturing into unknown country. But the second time she said it she smiled because she knew that wherever she went with Kern she would be safe.

Next morning her parents looked marvellous, dressed for the car ride and the air trip that would deposit them with their friends in the south of France. They were strikingly handsome together, and friends always invited them together, although the almost perfect marriage was really a marriage of convenience. They were useful to each other and they deserved each other.

Fleur had Kern McCabe's play in her luggage, and she would spend happy hours learning her role because she adored playing a part, being told how beautiful and talented she was. Philip was taking rackets, clubs, riding and swimming gear; all of which would

reassure him that he was as fit as ever and would probably go on for ever.

Their goodbyes to Philippa were affectionate and absent-minded. Then they got into their car and drove away, and neither noticed that the girl who stood in the doorway of their home waving goodbye was no longer the daughter they had so charmingly tolerated for nearly twenty years.

Philippa almost danced back into the house. In another two hours Kern would be here, and now she had to get the picnic together. He would have arranged to see her again, she was sure, but as he'd held out her mac for her last night she had said, 'We've eaten your dinner for tomorrow, so will you come to dinner with me? I could put up a picnic. We could go into the country.'

'Sounds fine,' he'd said. 'I'd like that.'

So he would be here around midday, and she went into the kitchen and asked the housekeeper, 'Will it be all right if I take out some food? I'm going on a picnic.'

This housekeeper had only been with them for just over a year, Fleur had a fairly rapid turnover in household staff, and she knew that the orders in this house came from Mr. and Mrs. Sorrell, never from Philippa. Philippa always asked, never demanded. She was a likeable girl but quiet, and Mrs. Jarvis hoped she would enjoy her picnic. 'How many of you?' she inquired, and when Philippa said,

'Just the two, but the other's a man,' she was pleased to hear that.

'We'd better pack plenty, then,' she said. 'If you'd told me sooner I could have cooked something special for you, but there's still a lot left from the party.' Pates and pies and cold meats and fruit, and Philippa made up a tossed salad, and packed a bottle of wine, and almost filled the big old picnic basket that dated from Victorian days when

picnicking was a social occasion. The basket was left in the hall and she ran upstairs to brush her hair again and freshen her make-up.

Today was an improvement on yesterday, dry and warm and spasmodically sunny, and she was wearing a red and white checked shirt and blue denim pants. She had slim hips and long legs for her height, and although she lacked Fleur's voluptuousness no one who was not blind as a bat would have mistaken her for a boy. She looked more feminine in the fitted pants and the shirt cinched in at the waist than she had done in the shapeless corn dolly dress.

And she felt more feminine, wonderfully warm and alive, wishing that she could hurry time on until Kern came.

She couldn't settle. She couldn't sit still, let alone read or occupy herself, and when he was due she posted herself at a window overlooking the drive, so that she could see when the car turned from the road.

He came on time. The silver grey car swung in, past the house that had once been a lodge but was now the gardener's cottage, and Philippa went running downstairs to open the front door and get outside.

'Hello!' she sounded as breathless as though she had run a mile, and Kern sounded the way he usually did, relaxed and slightly amused.

'Hello.' As he got out of the car he held out a hand to her and she caught it.

'The food's in a basket in the house,' she said. They walked to the house and through the wide open door, hand in hand. She would never have dared do that if her parents had been here. At least she didn't think she would, but with her fingers curled in his strong hand maybe she wouldn't care who saw her.

The picnic basket was on the hall floor just by the door and Kern asked, 'Are you leaving home?'

'It's the picnic.'

'For--?' He pointed to her, then himself, and she nodded. 'It is just the day, isn't it?' he said. 'We're not holing up in the woods.'

I'd like that, she thought, and he was smiling as though he would. 'It isn't all food,' she said. 'It's a fitted basket, cups and plates and knives and forks you know. It's old.'

'It's a ruddy antique,' said Kern. 'Who used to carry it?'

'I suppose there were more of them when they had picnics in those days.' She had wanted to make something special of this alfresco meal, although it would have been more sensible to have used a carrier bag, paper plates and cups and plastic containers. She said, 'Shall we just take what we need out of it?' and he lifted it up.

'All right if we eat by the car, but I'm not lugging this far. Is there a dining table in it?'

She giggled, helping to manoeuvre the outsize basket into the boot of the car. She could have made a bit of a fool of herself, but with Kern it was all a joke, and as she sat back in her seat she said, 'I thought we might eat at the nunnery.'

'The *what?*'

'St. Edyth's. About five miles from here on the Cleave Hills.' He looked at her with a mixture of alarm and suspicion and she went blithely on. 'The building fell down about a thousand years ago, but the site's still there. And on a dark night you can sometimes see the Grey Ladies.'

'Hasn't anyone told them the building fell down?'

'Perhaps it hasn't for them. Perhaps they can still see it.'

He laughed. 'Sounds just the place for a picnic. Where do I make for?'

She gave him the name of the nearest village and they drove through the lanes, reaching it, then, following her instructions, up a bumpy track that showed every sign of leading nowhere and vanished at last under coarse grass between bramble hedges.

At a gap in the hedges they pulled into a field. The site of the ancient convent was farther up the hill, and across fields, and any further progress would have to be on foot.

'Shall we have our picnic first?' Philippa suggested.

'Why not?' said Kern. He lifted the basket from the boot and Philippa opened the lid. Originally china and cutlery for six had been fitted in here. Out of the depleted remains Philippa had selected two sets. It was all heavily ornate, the cutlery weighty and embossed, the china in an overall pattern of black and gold leaves and rather ugly scarlet flowers. There was still a yellowing tablecloth, starched and folded, and napkins to match, and Philippa shook out the cloth and put it down where the grass seemed to be flattest.

With the party leftovers made neat and appetising by Mrs. Jarvis, the wine bottle and the fruit laid out, it was a very spectacular picnic. The Victorians had dined in the open air as nearly as possible as they dined in their homes, and Kern said, 'They did themselves proud, didn't they? When was this last used?'

Philippa sat cross-legged, scooping out pate from a china bowl and breaking up a French loaf. 'I can't remember it ever being used. Maybe the last girl who laid this cloth wore a long muslin dress and a little straw bonnet and she was with a young man in check trousers, a

velvet jacket and a floppy bow tie.' She explained, 'There's a photograph of a pair like that in an album at home.'

'There would be,' said Kern. 'But don't forget the chaperone.'

'Poor them,' said Philippa happily, 'I'm glad times have changed.'

'That reminds me,' Kern finished opening the wine and set the bottle aside turning back to the car, 'I've got something for you. Don't get too excited, it's a very small thing.'

That didn't matter. It was a gift and she would treasure it for ever. If it was a box of chocolates she would keep hankies in the box.

'Here you are.' He produced a pink paper bag with The Spinning Wheel printed on it in a flowing script, and when she opened the bag and peered in Philippa gave a little cry of delight.

It was a modern edition of a corn dolly, a little figure made of straw, but this one had tiny curls and a round face with eyes and a smiling mouth. This was a sweetheart of a corn dolly and Philippa laughed as she took it out of the bag and held it cupped in both hands. 'A corn dolly with a smile and curls? That's flying in the face of tradition.'

'Let's move with the times,' said Kern.

She put the corn dolly in the middle of the tablecloth. 'Thank you, I think she's beautiful.' He must have bought it this morning, parking in a tourist town that was always crowded at weekends, to go into the Spinning Wheel country crafts shop and get a little gift that would amuse her. And give a lift to her confidence, because that corn dolly quip of her mother's had hurt.

'I think she's beautiful too,' said Kern, and he wasn't looking at the corn dolly and she thought her heart would burst from happiness. She was filled with such a singing joy that she could hardly breathe.

He picked up his plate. 'This looks familiar.'

'We had it at the party, but pate keeps longer than two days, it's all right.'

'Garlic?'

'Yes.'

'You're having some?'

She had served herself with a portion too. She ate a forkful now and teased, 'Do you need a food-taster? Do you think I'm poisoning you?'

'If we both eat garlic that's togetherness,' he said.

She thought togetherness must be the loveliest word in the world. Being with someone with whom you could share everything: laughter, the taste of food, birdsong, love. I love you, she thought. But she couldn't say that until he said it. Or kissed her as though he loved her.

'You know something,' said Kern later, sprawled out. 'That party tasted better as a picnic.'

'Maybe the cheese had matured,' she said.

'No. The rest of them had gone.'

'Of course that's why.' She began to pack up, stacking the articles that were within reach into the basket beside her, and Kern sat up, then stood up and began to help her clear away. She put her corn dolly into the glove compartment of the car and he asked,

'When we get to St. Edyth's what's there to see?'

'Nothing. But that's where it used to be. You can see the mark of the foundations from an aeroplane.'

'Pity we don't have an aeroplane.'

'It's nice up there.' She didn't care where they went, and neither did he she felt. She smiled and he said,

'You know the way?'

There had once been a house, built higher on the hill. The track they took had once been concreted or flagstoned, but grass and roots had split the surface and the whole was overgrown and uneven underfoot.

There were cows and sheep in the fields, but the animals must have been brought by other routes because this road to the old farm was untrodden. A five- barred gate couldn't be opened for the grass growing around it, so they climbed over, and the old house stood to the left of the track, behind a rusting iron gate spiked with the remains of barbed wire.

It looked much the same as it had done for almost ten years in Philippa's memory, and probably long before that. The blind windows and doors, the roof falling in. A shell, but still the shape of a house.

She joked, 'If you want to get away from it ail there's just the place for you,' as Kern looked across. It was impressive in a macabre way. 'It must have been a lovely old place once,' she said. 'But I suppose they left it because it was so lonely and inconvenient.'

The track between the hedges ended here. They had to climb a stile into a field and Kern put a foot on the wooden step and swung long legs over the fence. 'Would you have left it for those reasons?' he asked.

She didn't have to stop to think. You could be isolated in a house full of people. 'No, I wouldn't,' she said. 'I'm sure I'd manage comfortably enough with oil lamps and well water.'

He smiled at her, 'I wonder.' He reached from the other side of the fence to help her over, and she stepped on the step, sat on the fence and swung round.

'One day,' she said, 'I'll have a house all on its own, with a stream, and an oil lamp in the window; and if you come and knock on my door I might make you a cup of tea.'

'You'd better,' he said. He held her for a moment before he released her, and his expression was enigmatic so that she wasn't sure if Kern was smiling or not. Then he loosed her and said, 'You're incredible.'

'I am?' Surpassing belief? Oh no, not her.

'You,' he said. 'How much farther up this hill?'

'We're nearly there.' They crossed a field, walking close to the ditch and hedge, and went through a gate into another field that formed a small plateau in the hillside. 'This is it,' said Philippa.

There was no sign left for the naked eye, although from time to time archaeologists dug into the faint discolouration that aerial photographs had revealed. But there had been no recent digging and sheep grazed placidly.

The view was rewarding, covering miles around, and they picked out places they recognised: churches, village greens, roads and houses. Then Philippa pointed to a group of trees. 'That's where the well was supposed to be, although it isn't really a well. It's just called Nun's Well, that group of trees, and having climbed up here you're entitled to a wish.'

Kern burst out laughing. 'A wishing well without any water?'

'That's right,' said Philippa.

Under the trees it was shady. There was a smallbasin-shaped hollow surrounded by grey irregular stones. The stones had been where they were now at least since the time of St. Edyth's Nunnery, and as nobody knew what they were, or why they were, they had gone by the name of Nun's Well for centuries.

Once Philippa had wished to grow up looking like her mother, so that didn't say much for the wishing well, but now she said, 'Close your eyes and make your wish and never tell.' She closed her eyes, laughing, and wished. It was nonsense, but the wish that Kern would love her was so much a part of her now that it came every time she closed her eyes.

When she opened them he was looking at her quizzically and she said, 'You don't believe in wishing wells?' They were a joke and she made a joke of it.

'Life's too short for wishing,' he said. He had probably never sat around wishing in his life; he would be impatient with folk who did. But everyone wasn't master of their fate, and Philippa said quietly,

'How can you help wishing if you want something very much?' She had wanted to look like her mother, and known that she never would, but the wish that was in her now was so strong that it gave her a challenging courage, so that she looked straight at him and hoped he would understand what she meant. She wished for him, she wanted him. She wished with all her heart and soul that he would take her in his arms and tell her he wanted her.

But he made no move towards her. He said, 'If you want something badly enough and you can pay the price, fair enough. If not—forget it.'

He wasn't rejecting her. She wouldn't consider that for a moment. She smiled as she said, 'That sounds terribly cynical.'

'Practical,' he said. 'But I am a cynic, didn't you know?'

There was no sentimentality in his books. The ones she had read had been so uncompromisingly realistic that she had found them uncomfortable; although the public bought them and the critics wrote things like, 'The place to open Kern McCabe's latest is on a jet- plane or a long distance train, because once you've started reading you won't be doing much else until you've reached the last page.'

She asked, 'You mean you don't enjoy life or you don't trust people?' and Kern grinned cheerfully.

'I enjoy life all right, but as for trusting people— about one in a hundred.'

There was no reason why he shouldn't trust her. Her life was an open book, and a dull one. Anybody reading her life story would soon put it down. If I had anything to hide, she thought, and that was a crazy notion, I shouldn't care to try to pull a fast one on you.

And then her thoughts raced ahead, running wild, out of her control. Suppose Kern stopped trusting her, stopped being kind. Suppose, instead of being safe and happy with him, there was war between them.

She shook her head, appalled at the nightmare twist her mind had taken, and shuddered as a sudden chill struck her bones, and he asked, 'What's the matter, love?'

'I think the grey sisters are walking early.' She shivered again. 'Let's get back into the sunshine.'

He put an arm around her, and drew her from the little copse of trees to the sun-dappled plain, and she couldn't believe that she had wondered for a black moment if they might ever come near to hating ...

She could hardly take the corn dolly into a beauty salon and say, 'Will you fix my hair like this?' but in a way that was what she did do, changed her image from the old corn dolly to the new.

When she got home that night she put Kern's gift on her dressing table and there it stood, gay and pretty, and every time she saw it she had to smile. Next morning she phoned a hairdresser's, not the one her mother used when she had her hair done locally, which wasn't often, but a salon with a rising reputation with the young set, and fixed an appointment at once. Monday mornings were about the slackest time of the week, so they were glad to see her, and she came out with a soft curly perm, a bouncier, livelier style.

She knew how to make up, of course, but her cosmetic choice had always been on the safe side. With her pale skin she had stuck to pastels. This morning she went on a spending spree on the cosmetic counters of the town's largest store, asking advice from the assistant who looked nearest what she was aiming for.

She bought a coral lipstick and blusher, a moisturiser that warmed her skin with a faintly golden sheen, and new eye make-up.

'You've got lovely eyes, haven't you?' said the assistant with open envy, and the colour of her eyes was something that Philippa had inherited from her mother, but her mother's lashes were long and dark, fringing her eyes. And so could Philippa's be with two coats of a darker mascara.

She made up carefully, and when she got round to the village hall Ellen and Lulu's expressions were as good as a round of applause.

They thought she looked smashing. They were wild about her hairstyle, which was simple enough, but combined with her make-up, and most of all with her glow of happiness, to add up to a transformation.

She radiated animation, and a feel of beauty, so that for the first time the two girls who had been working beside her for months noticed the grace in her lissom body, the gamine charm of the pointed face. It was such an improvement that they both hit on the explanation right away.

'Who's the man?' Lulu demanded, and Philippa laughed.

'Wait and see.'

Kejn came to collect her, sitting in his car outside the hall and giving the collecting mothers something to talk about. Philippa had dashed out as soon as he arrived and said, 'I won't be long.'

'Take your time,' he'd said, 'I'll see if I can spot the one who looks like me.'

When the children had gone she went out again and asked, 'Did you spot our Paddy?'

'The ginger one? Not a handsome kid, is he?'

'I think he's sweet.'

'That's all right, then.' He opened the car door for her.

'Although,' she pretended to sigh, 'he needs more watching than the rest of them put together.'

'Good lad,' said Kern.

'Would you come and meet my friends?' she asked, and he shrugged.

'Sure.'

She hadn't had much choice about that. Ellen and Lulu were hovering just inside the open door, and anyhow, Philippa wanted to say, 'This is Kern McCabe.' She was proud of him, and there were still moments when she couldn't believe what was happening to her.

But it was real, and so were Ellen and Lulu's reactions. Surprise at first ... '*The Kern McCabe?*' Lulu began, then giggled, 'There wouldn't be two with that name, would there? You're my husband's favourite writer.'

'That's good to know.' Kern's grin had a touch of mischief. 'As he seems to be a man who picks the best.' And Lulu blushed and went on giggling.

They were both immensely impressed. He talked, joked with them and charmed them, and he certainly explained the change in Philippa. They watched the car drive off, Philippa's bright curly head level with Kern's shoulder, and Ellen said, 'Lucky old Philippa!'

They loved their husbands, and wouldn't have swapped them for any man alive, but Lulu nodded, wide-eyed and wistful, and agreed, 'You can say that again.'

Tonight was the Indian restaurant, and in the car Philippa asked, 'Will you take me home first so I can change?' 'Change into what?' The Sorrells' house was on the outskirts of the village, where the village street became a lane. Kern turned off, into the drive, and Philippa looked down at her paint-daubed jeans.

'Into a girl,' she said.

'You're girl enough for me, love.'

She smiled and snuggled against him. 'You do say the nicest things.' She hoped that he meant it because she did, that he was all the men she would ever want. But she couldn't have said it lightly as he had. Her voice would have been husky and serious, and that would have been too big a risk to take.

The evening was a success. She had put on her prettiest dress and felt as fascinating as any woman in the restaurant. Kern liked her hair. He said so. 'Your new hairstyle suits you.'

'Recognise it?' She leaned across the table, facing him across two great plates of curry and a fat guttering candle. 'The new corn dolly.'

'Of course,' he said. 'But it looks better on you.'

When he brought her home she suggested that he came in for a coffee, although she understood when he said he'd better not. He might do some work tonight when he got home, in any case he had to be up early. But she held her breath until he asked, 'When do I see you again?'

'Any time,' she said.

Life went on getting better. She was spending almost all her spare time with Kern now. They went to theatres, films, they ate in all sorts of places. Almost every afternoon Kern either met her from play-school or collected her from home.

Once she overheard Lulu say to Ellen, 'She's rather living in his pocket, isn't she?' and Ellen replied,

'Not a bad place to live, if you ask me.' And that was funny because only a couple of days before Kern had been going up to London on business, and Philippa had joked,

'How about putting me in your pocket?'

'Why not?' Kern had said, and so she had gone along for the ride. They had taken the motorway, and Philippa had gone shopping and to an exhibition at the Tate, and met him afterwards. They had been late getting home that night, driving back under the stars, and hearing her friends she could have told them that it was secure and safe in Kern's pocket, and there was nowhere she would rather be than close to him.

This relationship had changed her life, filling each day with promise so that she woke each morning as excited as on childhood birthdays, before she had realised that all the presents didn't mean that anybody loved her. Each day she thought—today he might tell me he loves me and he wants me.

He must want her, because he made undemanding love to her, touching her gently, stroking her cheek, her hair, kissing her; which was wonderfully comforting and reassuring, although she longed for more. She ached for him to sweep her off her feet and carry her to the heights. If he would only show her, help her, she knew that she could love him as she dreamed of loving.

If he was considering her reputation he need not have bothered, because nobody gave them the benefit of the doubt. Kern McCabe was very much a man of the world, and he and Philippa Sorrel were nearly inseparable these days, and everyone who knew Kern presumed they were having an affair.

Even Lulu and Ellen thought it possible, and Kern's friends and acquaintances tossed the gossip around. 'Have you heard Kern McCabe's got a new girl? Is that why Liliass Storr shot off to the Bahamas?'

When it reached Philip and Fleur at their holiday hideaway Fleur laughed. She was getting ready for an evening out, painting each eyelash separately, a study of absorption, when Philip came into the bedroom looking puzzled and slightly perturbed.

He stood behind her and said, 'I've just had a phone call from Jack.'

Jack Egan was the agent of the Sorrel estate, and Philippa went on with her eyelashes. 'Don't tell me something tiresome's happened. Surely Jack can cope.'

'Not with this,' said Philip. 'It's Philippa. Jack says she's off all the time with Kern McCabe.'

'*What?*' That was when Fleur laughed, taking care not to blink her eyes but laughing merrily. 'He must be joking.'

'He wasn't.' Philip hadn't taken McCabe for a man who would have given Philippa a second glance. 'Of course she's an endearing enough child, but I can't see McCabe falling for her. I thought he was supposed to be a confirmed bachelor.'

Fleur took up her mascara brush again. 'He is. It's been him and Liliass Storr the fashion writer for the past twelve months. She was supposed to be coming to the party, but she flew off somewhere.'

They both thought about that. Philip said, 'The sooner she flies back the better, but why choose Philippa to amuse himself with while she's away?'

Fleur said slowly, 'He might find Philippa a refreshing change for a while. Liliass has got everything going for her and she knows what she's worth, but he could have Philippa eating out of his hand, and that could be amusing for him while the poor child thinks she's falling in love.'

Philip swore. 'And then what happens?'

'He walks out on her, of course, more than likely back to Liliass, and we're left with the pieces.'

The prospect of Philippa needing care and cherishing appalled them. Fleur said, in the trembling tones she used so effectively in her work, 'I won't have her heart- broken. She's my daughter and I love her very much. This is like putting her in a cage and expecting her to tame a tiger.'

Philip paced the room, asking, 'So what the hell do we do?'

'Get her on the phone,' said Fleur promptly. 'I'll talk to her.' And she had to sit still for a few minutes before her hand was steady enough to finish her eyelashes...

Philippa and Kern were playing Scrabble when the phone call came through. They were in the drawing room of the Sorrels' home, and Philippa was consulting a dictionary to prove there was no such word as leno. She went across and lifted the receiver and gasped, 'Mother!'

Fleur wasted no time. 'Philip's just been talking to someone at home and we're very worried. What kind of a fool are you letting Kern McCabe make of you?'

'Kern?' Philippa croaked, and by then he was beside her. 'He's here,' she whispered. She heard her mother say,

'You speak to him,' and she handed Kern the receiver.

'It's my parents,' she said needlessly.

'Yes,' said Kern into the receiver. Philippa couldn't hear what her father was saying, but she knew from Kern's reply that he must have demanded, 'What's going on?'

'What did you hear was going on?'

Kern's voice was flat, but her father's voice rose so shrilly that it reached Philippa, although Kern had the receiver to his ear. 'Why are

you trailing Philippa around with you? For God's sake man, she's not your type. What's the game?'

Philippa felt her body stiffen as though she was tensing against a blow, and then Kern said 'It's no game. I want her to marry me.'

He put down the receiver on its cradle, cutting the connection and she stared, dazed, not believing what she had heard. She said through unsteady lips, 'Why did you say that? You didn't meant it.'

But he never said what he didn't mean, and now he just said, 'Please, will you marry me?'

CHAPTER FOUR

PHILIPPA said, 'Of course I'll marry you, but why?'

Kern didn't seem a marrying man, but after only three weeks, during which they had been loving companions but not lovers, he was asking her to marry him. 'Because I'm in love with you,' he said.

She was in his arms, he had never said that before, and she felt joy so piercing that it was a pain in her heart that made her bite on her lip and close her eyes. Kern said, 'All right, I'm no oil painting, but I'm a good provider, and you could get used to my face.'

He made her laugh. She touched his temples with her fingertips and ran her fingers through the red hair that grew strong and springily. 'I am used to it,' she said. 'I like it. Will you please kiss me?'

The kiss sent her senses spinning, so that afterwards she clung to him for dear life, and buried her head against his shoulder. 'And you're sure that marriage will be a good idea?' she whispered.

'I'm sure,' he said, 'that you suit me very well.'

She did. She would. There would be no way in which they did not suit each other. 'And you suit me.' She traced the lines across his brow. 'Face and all.' He grinned at her,

'I got those early. I'm younger than I look, knocking on thirty, although I suppose that sounds ancient to you.'

'I'm knocking on twenty myself, but I often used to feel around fifty, so dates don't have much to do with it.' Her mother and father were proof of that, and she remembered them with a pang of panic. 'Tuesday week, to be exact,' she said. 'That's my birthday.'

She hoped he would say, 'How about getting married on your birthday?' and when he did she asked,

'Could we? As soon as that?'

'Sooner, if we put our minds to it.'

She would have liked to run away tonight and come back married and then she could have faced anyone and anything. But of course that was out of the question. 'Yes,' she said, 'on my birthday.'

It seemed incredible that they were discussing marriage, and so calmly. They went back to the Scrabble and Philippa wouldn't have been all that surprised if Kern had picked up his cards again, but he didn't. He put an arm around her, as they sat on the settee, and she cuddled up as she had done lot of times before, but this time he said, 'Where do you want to go for a honeymoon?'

'I don't mind. Anywhere.' It wouldn't matter where so long as they were alone together. A honeymoon would be Kern, it wouldn't be a place. The view from the window wouldn't matter. 'Just put me in your pocket,' she said, and he turned her face upwards, smiling at her.

The phone rang again, and she almost jumped out of her skin, out of his arms. 'It's them! My mother and father.'

'Very likely.' He got up, but Philippa hurried as though the ringing was hurting her head. She didn't want them to speak to Kern, and when her mother's voice came through she made herself smile at him while Fleur was demanding, 'What is all this nonsense? Kern hasn't asked you to marry him, has he?'

'Yes,' said Philippa.

'When?'

'Just now.'

'He's joking.'

'No,' said Philippa.

'Now look, darling,' Philippa was being acidly reasonable. 'Don't take it seriously, because he has a very odd sense of humour has McCabe. Ten years ago I'd have thought he was seducing you by promising to marry you, but these days it's got to be a joke, unless he's casting you as a character in his next book.'

'I never thought of that,' said Philippa. She began to laugh, and Fleur said,

'So don't rush around spreading the news, we don't want you made a laughing-stock.' She paused for a moment. 'Are you laughing?'

'No.' But the things her mother was suggesting were so ridiculous that it was an effort to keep down the giggles, and perhaps she was slightly hysterical, the speed at which things were moving. She said, 'Don't worry, Mother, I can always sue him, either for breach of promise or libel,' and Kern's astonished expression sent her into further giggles so that she could hardly gasp out, 'Don't worry,' again. She added quickly, 'I promise you everything is going to be fine, I hope you're having a lovely holiday, goodbye now', and hung up.

'Didn't you know,' said Kern, 'they've scrapped breach of promise? And what's this about libel?'

'My mother thinks you might be leading me on to use as copy in your next book.'

He said quietly, 'Stupid bitch,' and then, 'Sorry, love, but how did a couple like that get a daughter like you?'

She said gaily, 'That's what lots of folk have wondered,' and all the years of feeling a disappointment, something not quite up to standard, slipped away as though she had stepped out of an ill-fitting garment.

'This honeymoon,' said Kern, 'where are we going?'

They went round the world in the next hour or two, hopping from place to place, and, as Kern had spent a good-portion of the last ten years doing just that, he provided a run-down on advantages and disadvantages.

Philippa had had a few holidays abroad, but as she simply didn't care whether they stayed in England or rocketed to the moon at the end she was still saying, 'Sounds lovely' or, 'Not there, then.'

'So where?' he said, with the clock well past midnight.

'I don't know. You choose somewhere, and don't tell me where we're going, surprise me.'

Kern's eyes crinkled with amusement. 'All right, so long as you don't tell everybody that's what you're expecting on honeymoon—a surprise.'

She leaned against him, laughing against his cheek, his ear, and he kissed her eyelids and nose, and then her mouth and her lips parted and they clung together with rising urgency until he drew back a little and said, 'I'd better go, it's getting late.'

He got up, still holding her, and she faltered, 'I wish you didn't have to go.'

'So do I, but--' he shrugged, and she knew all the reasons why he should, but when they parted it would be tomorrow before they saw each other again, and she was afraid of tomorrow. She shivered in his arms and he asked, 'What's frightening you? Not me, for God's sake?'

'No. Tomorrow.'

'What about tomorrow?'

'Things might change.'

He didn't kiss her again, making love to her so that her senses became more clamorous than her doubts could ever be. Instead he spoke quietly, holding her gently, telling her, 'Nothing is going to change.'

You have more self-control than I, she thought. I could lose my head, let my feelings take over, but you're not even trembling.

'Anyway,' he said, 'it is tomorrow, and this morning we'll get your ring. Then wave that at them and tell them to mind their own business. I'll be around just after nine.'

'Don't you work in the mornings?' As she asked that he grinned at her and she smiled wryly at herself.

'You're the kind of wife every writer should have,' he teased her. He ruffled her hair, and for a moment they were fused together again, but before Philippa could wind her arms around his neck he had stepped away. 'I'll see myself out. You stay right where you are, and don't move until you hear that car start up.'

She stared, puzzled. 'Why?'

'Have a heart, love, I'm only human.' It was flattering to pretend that if she had clung to him she could have kept him here, but it wasn't true. He was going, no matter how much she wanted him to stay. But he would be back in a few hours' time to put a ring on her finger.

She called after him, 'I've only your word for that,' and he turned in the doorway, frowning,

'For what?'

'That you're only human.' He burst out laughing,

'Don't push your luck,' he said.

She went to the window and watched the car go, the rear lights dwindling and then vanishing in the curve of the drive, and she wasn't smiling any more. Kern had asked her to marry him. He was buying her a ring tomorrow, today, and when she was wearing his ring everyone would know that it wasn't a joke.

Surely her mother and father would be happy. They wanted her married, and on every score Kern was streets ahead of Edmund. They would be hard pressed to find a more eligible son-in-law. They should be delirious with delight, the first time Philippa had won a prize worth having.

That was how she felt, like the unknown extra awarded the West End starring role, the down-and-out with a record pools win. She still couldn't believe it, but so long as she stayed in this room she could look at the phone on the small table by the wall and think—he asked me to marry him as we stood there, we sat on this sofa and planned a honeymoon, just here he said he would come for me at nine o'clock and buy me a ring.

But if she went into the dark hall, and up to her silent room, the doubts might crowd in on her. She had always been alone in this house, and she was scared to go to bed because she wouldn't sleep. She would toss in the darkness between rapture and apprehension, not absolutely sure what was happening because nothing in her life, until she met Kern, had given her reason to believe that anyone could meet her and within three weeks decide they wanted to spend the rest of their lives with her. Much less a man with his boundless horizons.

While he was with her she could believe that he loved and wanted her, but now she was alone with no one to reassure her that she was lovable, and every room in this house full of memories that she was not.

She sat down again, on the sofa, the atlas of the world on the rug at her feet. They had turned the pages seeking a honeymoon spot, and she wished now that she had chosen, so that at least that would have been tangible. She could have told herself, 'That is where we shall go when we're married. We shall travel together there.' But they had named nowhere, it was still all in dreams.

She looked down at her small capable hands, the pink-polished nails cut short enough to divide squirming, squabbling children without risking a broken nail or a scratched child, and tried to imagine a ring on her finger.

But there was no ring yet, and she pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, a reaction setting in that felt like rejection. Because why should Kern McCabe, who was famous and rich and madly attractive, choose *her*? What did she have that the others lacked? There was only one Kern McCabe, but you could walk through any town and pass countless girls who measured up to Philippa Sorrel. The small ways in which she was different weren't nearly enough to enslave a man like him.

A man like him, a girl like her. It wasn't on. Not for marriage, a lifetime's commitment. She was rapidly slipping back into the insecurity she had been reared with, so that when the phone rang and she picked it up and heard Kern's voice asking, 'I didn't wake you, did I?' it was no comfort at all.

'No.' He must have phoned her as soon as he got home. He had had ten quiet miles for thinking. 'Have you changed your mind?' she asked.

'Have you?' he chuckled. 'Before you answer that— you try jilting me and I'll put you in a book, and that's a threat, not a promise.'

'You—you didn't—you didn't ring me up to say...'

His voice was quick and concerned. 'What's the matter?'

Tears were on Philippa's cheeks. She sniffed and stammered, 'I'm sorry, but I've been sitting here and thinking it would be different tomorrow. I suppose it's the reaction or something, the surprise, it was a--'

'A shock?' She wondered if he was smiling. Whether he was or not, the room wasn't empty any more. She could feel the strength and the warmth of him close to her. 'Sorry,' he said, 'but I've known from that first night. I thought you had.'

'I've known I loved you,' she said simply. 'But after you'd gone I thought—why should he want to marry me?'

'So did I,' he said. 'Why should I be so lucky? I thought.'

'Honestly?'

'So I rang to warn you against welshing on me.'

'I'm glad you did.' She was smiling now, cradling the receiver as though her touch as well as her voice could reach him. 'I was feeling lonely.'

'So long as I'm in the world you'll never be alone,' he said, and she knew then that it was all right. She believed that.

'I love you,' she said.

'I love you. Sleep well. Goodnight.' She heard the faint click and put down the phone, then she turned out the lights and went upstairs. Through the windows the stars shone like diamonds in a black sky.

She remembered before she woke. Perhaps her last dream was of Kern, or perhaps all her dreams were, because she woke smiling and so happy that everything seemed to be glittering. She blinked into the pale sunshine streaming through her bedroom window, then rolled on to one elbow to check the time on the bedside clock.

Eight o'clock! Wasn't that splendid timing? She had a whole hour. She needn't panic, she could spread getting dressed and breakfasting so that it lasted until Kern came.

She had no doubts at all this morning. It was still a miracle that Kern should have fallen for her as deeply as she had fallen for him, but he had, and that was all that mattered.

He arrived just after nine o'clock and Philippa went out to him. 'Have you had your breakfast?' she asked, because he looked as though he might have been rushing. He was smoothly shaven, but his hair was dishevelled, and he was wearing an olive green sweater inside out. 'If you haven't,' she offered, 'shall I get you some?'

'Thanks, love, but I don't eat breakfast. Just coffee, and I've had enough of that to be going on with.' He had the door open for her, but she didn't get in. She said,

'I didn't know that. We've got a lot to find out about each other.'

Kern grinned at her. 'Don't worry. If you marry me I'll forgive you.'

'Thank you very much. You don't think there's anything to forgive. Watch out that you're not taking on more than you bargain for.' She laughed at him, and he caught her wrist and pulled her down into the seat beside him, and kissed her hard and hungrily, his lips bruising

against hers. Afterwards she clung to him, feeling the beating of his heart.

'Happy?' he asked her.

'Doesn't happiness show?' she said huskily. 'The way I feel today you should be rubbing your eyes when you look at me.'

'I am,' he said. 'It won't be easy finding a ring to match you.'

'I love you,' she said. With a little practice she would be able to tell him why and how much, but now she said, 'I love you,' and each time she said it she meant it more.

'Then let's get that ring.'

She checked him, her fingers covering his on the ignition key, and asked mischievously, 'Are you wearing your sweater inside out for luck, or is it supposed to be reversible?'

He glanced down at himself. 'Strewth! If I go into a jewellers like this we won't get out with a box, let alone a ring.' He peeled the sweater over his head, and dragged it on again, right side out this time. Then he looked at himself in the little mirror of the passenger seat eyeshield, leaning across her and wincing at the sight. 'You wouldn't have a comb on you?'

Philippa took a comb from her handbag and he made a quick stab at smoothing down his hair. Then he said, 'We might have to wait till the banks open. I wouldn't take a cheque for more than ten quid from anybody looking like me this morning.'

'All right,' she said. 'We'll window-shop a while.'

But there was no need. They went into the best jewellers in town where they were greeted and treated with every respect. Kern

McCabe always was, wherever he went. Even those who didn't know him from Adam knew that he carried weight. He got quick service everywhere. No one jostled him in the streets. His cheques were accepted, and even those who didn't recognise the signature knew the account would be met.

The other customers in the shop, three middle-aged women, were choosing something for a silver wedding gift, ^undecided between a small round tray, prettily chased, and a posy holder.

Twenty-five years, thought Philippa. Not everyone reaches a silver wedding these days. Twenty-five years is a long way to go. Kern touched her arm, and she looked at him and suspected he was reading her thoughts. She wanted him to say, 'We'll make it,' but he said nothing, and then the assistant who had come to meet them asked,

'Can I show you something, sir?' breaking into a delighted beam when Kern said,

'Engagement rings.'

'Congratulations,' said the assistant, and as engagements usually represented a good sale he meant that sincerely.

Philippa sat on a little white stool topped in cinnamon velvet, while trays of rings were placed on the glass-topped table before her. She had no idea what kind of ring she wanted, and as soon as the assistant realised there might be no ceiling price on this sale it was suggested that they could view in more privacy and comfort in the manager's office. From then on the rings became steadily more splendid.

At last, with a diamond on her finger that nearly reached her knuckle, Philippa said, 'It's a bit Buffi Orpington.' Not that Edmund could have afforded a ring like this, but on her hand it did look fussy, overdressed, and Kern smiled at her,

'The Buff Orpingtons are the last thing we want.' She wished they had gone to a small shop, or browsed among the antiques, but here she was, and of course she could find a ring among this fantastic selection.

The trouble was there was so many of them that she almost begged, 'Choose one for me,' to Kern. Then she remembered that she had already asked him to choose where they went for the honeymoon, and he might begin to wonder if she had a mind of her own at all. She had, quite a practical mind, but this place was an Aladdin's cave, and she was spoiled for choice.

'Suppose we narrow the field?' Kern suggested. 'Is it going to be diamonds?'

'Please.' She had decided that far, and by elimination they brought the choice down until she was left with three. They were all so beautiful that she sighed, trying on first one and then another, and Kern said,

'Take your time, you've got to live with it for life.'

And with you, she thought, and tears of sheer happiness came into her eyes, so that the ring on her finger swam in rainbow colours and she said, 'I'll have this one, please.' She took off the ring and placed it down, and the men all looked at the ring and that gave her a chance to blink the tears away quickly. She didn't want to seem a complete idiot, and as Kern picked up the ring she knew that it was the one she wanted, out of the whole shopful.

It was a triangular-cut diamond in a modern setting and she could live happily with it for life. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever had, and this was the most beautiful day.

As Kern signed the cheque the manager said with satisfaction, 'I thought I recognised you, sir, it *is* Kern McCabe.' There were photographs on the back of books, occasional pictures in newspapers

and magazines, and Kern moved around. 'May I say how much I enjoy your books?' said the manager, and got in a little quip about a crooked diamond merchant in one of them.

Kern thanked him, and he and Philippa were congratulated again, this time with a hearty handshake. 'Please accept our very best wishes for your future happiness, Mr. McCabe and Miss--?'

'Sorrel,' Philippa gave her name, and the manager, who was well up on local notables, repeated it after her, making it a question.

'Miss Sorrel?'

'Fleur Sorrel is my mother,' she said.

For the first time there was no reflex of astonishment. She was a different type from her mother, but she was the girl for whom Kern McCabe had been ready to buy the best ring in the shop. She was a glowing girl, and very pretty, the manager thought, and Philippa could have kissed him. He didn't know how wonderful it was to admit to someone that you were Fleur Sorrel's daughter, and not be made to feel you should apologise for disappointing them.

Philippa and Kern had lunch in a country pub, before he drove her round to the play-school and arranged to collect her from there at the end of the afternoon session.

Ellen and Lulu were stepping quietly around the recumbent figures of children who were supposed to be taking a short rest after lunch, and as Philippa walked in they smiled across at her. She beckoned them into the little side-room that was used for hats and coats, and when they had both followed her she said, 'I've got some news for you. I'm getting married!'

They gasped, and still gasping, Lulu croaked, 'Not Kern?'

'Of course.' Who else? It was Kern or nobody for Philippa and always would be, but they both seemed at a loss for words, smiling and floundering, looking at each other and back at Philippa, still dumb-struck.

'*Never,*' said Ellen at last, and then, 'How *wonder-full*'

'It's that all right,' said Philippa, and suddenly they were both gabbling at once, telling her how thrilled they were, how happy for her.

'You've been a different girl since you met him,' and both Lulu and Ellen thought the new Phillipa was a knockout, 'but gosh, this is a surprise. How long have you known each other?'

They knew, but when she said, 'Three weeks,' they looked groggy all over again.

'And he's asked you to marry him in only three weeks?' wailed Ellen. 'It took Bill nearer three years to get round to asking me. And then he didn't really propose. He asked what I wanted for Christmas and I told him—your *ring*, you've got a ring!' She grabbed Philippa's hand and the ring on her third finger silenced them. They looked at it in wonder.

'Oh, it is so beautiful,' Lulu whispered, almost reverently. 'Oh, you are lucky. Have you fixed when you're getting married?'

'A week on Tuesday.'

'You're not wasting much time, are you?' Ellen giggled, 'Grabbing him before he has second thoughts?' Then she looked embarrassed. 'Not that he would, of course, I don't mean that, but—oh, I think it's terribly exciting!'

She thought that Philippa was lucky, and she thought that Kern McCabe *might* change his mind, although she had been joking. But I know differently, thought Philippa.

The children spotted her ring. They said it was lovely and had it come out of a cracker because often great big shiny rings did, and Philippa wondered what they would have made of some of the rings she had turned down. This was modest by comparison, but the elegant modern design made her hands seem more graceful, her fingers shapelier. The ring on her finger gave her wings on her heels so that she floated through the next couple of hours, until the blare of a car hooter in the road outside brought her down to earth.

She recognised the hooter and Lulu, who had looked through a window to see who was there, said, 'It's your mother. I didn't know they were due back.'

'They weren't for another week,' said Philippa. 'My news must have brought them. Do you mind if I run?'

She did run. This was the first time her parents had let her affect their timetable, and that imperious horn hooting didn't sound encouraging. Fleur took her finger off the buzzer when Philippa came out, and that was the only concession she did make. There wasn't even a token smile. She asked, 'What have you done to your hair?' as Philippa got into the car, and Philippa said quickly,

'This is a surprise—I wasn't expecting you.'

'Weren't you?' Fleur started up the car, did a sharp three-point turn and headed for home. Then she demanded, 'What were you expecting? That we should forget last night's phone calls for the next six days?'

'Maybe,' Philippa murmured, but Fleur didn't hear that.

'I have to talk to you,' she said. But she wasn't talking yet. She was driving over the speed limit for the village street, fortunately there was little about, and she swung into the drive making the car squeal.

'Did you both come back?' Philippa asked meekly.

'No,' said Fleur.

Of course not. If Philippa was making a fool of herself her mother would consider herself quite capable of coping. It was obvious she hadn't dashed back to share Philippa's happiness, and that a night's sleep hadn't changed the Sorrels' antagonism against Kern as a son-in-law. Although Philippa found that inexplicable, she knew her mother was here to cause trouble.

Fleur had always been able to make Philippa cringe. She had a merciless tongue when provoked, and Philippa remembered the sinking feeling that used to come over her when her mother's lips thinned as they were thinning now. Fleur had stopped the car in front of the house and turned to look at Philippa with that how-did-I-get-a-daughter-like-this look. Then, without a word, she opened the door and swung her long legs out of the car, walking with her fast stride in through the front door.

She expected Philippa to hurry after her, and Philippa remembered the sinking feeling. But that was all it was, a memory. Three weeks ago she would have been scrambling out of that car and going at a fast trot after her mother, anxious not to aggravate whatever her failing was this time.

By now she followed at a reasonable pace, and although she wasn't looking forward to the hour ahead she knew that nothing Fleur could say could cut her down. She was so strong and sure and happy that nothing could destroy her.

Fleur had gone into the small drawing room, the living room of the house. When Philippa reached her she was sitting, graceful as ever, in one of the deep comfortable chairs, her head back against the cushions, her eyes closed. She looked tired, and Philippa asked, 'Can I get you some tea? Or a drink?'

With eyes still closed Fleur said, 'The tea should be here, I told Mrs. Jarvis I'd only be five minutes,' and right on cue the housekeeper came in with a tray of Fleur's own china tea.

The phone call that Mrs. Sorrel was to be met at the airport hadn't surprised the household staff, madam was always dashing here and there. But as soon as she had arrived she had gone off to collect Miss Philippa and from her expression the change in Philippa that everybody had noticed was not to madam's liking.

The housekeeper gave Philippa an encouraging smile as Philippa came forward to pour out the tea, and as she left the room she heard Fleur say grimly, 'Now then, about Kern McCabe,' and was pleased to see that Philippa went on pouring with a steady hand.

'How did it start?' Fleur demanded. 'When did you meet him?'

'At the party.' Philippa added the thin slice of lemon and offered her mother the cup. 'Don't you remember, you introduced us.'

'Of course I remember.' But that was only three weeks ago. Although with a man like McCabe and a girl like Philippa it was long enough for Philippa to be swept off her feet. 'He's been taking you around ever since?'

'Yes.'

Fleur sipped her tea. She needed it. She felt jaded after her journey and she wasn't enjoying this. She could have shaken Philippa for not showing more sense, but she had to admit it wasn't Philippa's fault;

and Fleur, who had hurt Philippa consciously and unconsciously times without number, was genuinely concerned for her now. 'And of course,' said Fleur, 'you think you're in love with him.'

'Yes,' said Philippa, her voice quiet, although she wanted to shout it from the housetop.

'That I can understand.' Fleur gestured wearily with the hand that wasn't holding the teacup. 'He's quite a man, and he's probably had more women than you've had hot dinners.'

Philippa began to smile and Fleur coloured angrily. Philippa had never laughed at her before. She said tersely, 'Perhaps not. Up to now he's gone for quality rather than quantity. One at a time.'

'I don't want to hear,' said Philippa. Of course she knew there had been other women before her, but she could do without a list of names.

'I'm sure you don't,' said Fleur, and sighed, and went on relentlessly, 'for the last twelve months it's been Liliastorr.' When there was no reaction from Philippa she sighed again, less in sympathy this time than exasperation, 'Liliastorr the fashion writer. Surely you've heard of her?'

'Oh yes.' Philippa remembered a magazine picture and knew that she might have had a rival who was almost as beautiful as her mother.

'If she hadn't been abroad,' Fleur stressed, 'she'd have been at the party with him, and when she does come back, darling, what chance do you think you're going to stand?'

Every chance, thought Philippa, but her mother took her silence for uncertainty and said, 'I don't know why he asked you to marry him last night. Perhaps Philip put his back up, asking him what the game was. I don't know, but of course he doesn't mean to go through with it,

and we don't want you breaking up when you realise that, because that would be very silly, wouldn't it?"

Fleur Sorrel's lovely voice was husky. She meant what she was saying. It would be quite dreadful if Philippa should go to pieces, have a nervous breakdown, but by taking Philippa back with her for a holi-day, away from Kern McCabe, Fleur hoped to avoid that calamity.

This was all so ridiculous, and if she hadn't had that lovely part in Kern's play, that she hoped would lead to more lovely parts, she would have told him exactly what she thought of him. Not that he did the casting, but he might have some say in the matter, and in any case it would be undignified to start a slanging match.

'Men,' said Fleur sanctimoniously, 'are so selfish. They never think about anyone but themselves.' She gave her daughter the first woman-to-woman look she had ever directed at her. 'Today Kern's going to be wondering how to explain that he's changed his mind.'

'I don't think so,' said Philippa. 'But he'll be calling at the scout hut to collect me in half an hour, then he'll come round here and then we'll see if he's changed his mind since this morning.'

'You saw him this morning?' That surprised Fleur.

'When he bought me this.' Philippa held out her hand and Fleur's eyes went very wide. She hadn't seen the ring till then, she hadn't thought to look for one, but from the white fire of the stone her glance went over Philippa again. She had noticed the new hairstyle and she had looked at Philippa, but now she really looked and saw the change. There was colour, a soft- textured radiance, a vibrant happiness. She was pretty, more than pretty, and although Fleur knew that quite ordinary girls could blossom amazingly when they were in love she hadn't expected this.

She was dumbfounded. That ring must have cost a bomb. Kern McCabe must actually be intending to marry' Philippa, and that took Fleur's breath away, and frightened her so that for a moment her flawless face looked haggard and Philippa pleaded, 'You wanted me to get married, didn't you? You'd have settled, for Edmund, so why aren't you happy about Kern?'

'Edmund, yes.' The teacup was rattling on the saucer and Fleur put it down, almost missing the table as she didn't look where she was putting it. 'Because we want you to marry a man you've a hope of holding longer than six months.'

That sounded brutal, but it was for Philippa's sake, she had to be shocked into facing facts. But Philippa only smiled,

'Six months is better than nothing,' she said. It was no use trying to explain to her mother that she and Kern would be together as long as they lived, and so long as Kern was in the world she would never be lonely again.

There was a tap on the door and Mrs. Jarvis stepped in, rather apprehensively, to say that there were a couple from the *Chronicle* asking if they could see Miss Sorrel.

'Not now,' said Fleur wearily. 'Ask them to ring later. Explain that I've just flown in and I'm dead beat.'

'It's Miss Philippa they're asking for.' Mrs. Jarvis had also taken it for granted that it was Fleur, and had corrected the callers, '*Mrs.* Sorrel, you mean.'

'Mrs. Sorrel's daughter,' she had been told, and had been too startled to ask,

'What do you want her for?' Now she waited to find out.

'Oh *no*, you haven't notified the press?' Fleur wailed. After seeing the ring she shouldn't have been surprised that they had made an official announcement, but she didn't want the press around until she had done a great deal more talking to Philippa.

'Not me,' said Philippa cheerfully. 'But Kern was recognised at the jewellers this morning.'

Mrs. Jarvis cottoned on, spotting the ring, and starting to smile until Fleur groaned, 'Tell them Miss Philippa isn't at home.'

'No, I'll see them,' said Philippa. Mrs. Sorrel had always given the orders, but this time it was Philippa who was in control. Mrs. Jarvis hesitated, and Fleur put her fingertips over her eyes for a moment, calming herself, breathed deeply a couple of times and then nodded slowly.

In the few moments mother and daughter were alone Fleur said caustically, 'Don't say any more than you have to. Just smile, and be thankful it's the small league and not the nationals. The *Chronicle* aren't going to ask how you got him away from Liliastor.

It would be dreadful if they should ask her anything like that, and she gripped her fingers tightly together, and prayed that Kern would hurry up, and wished belatedly that she had let Mrs. Jarvis deliver her mother's message.

But it was quite a pleasant interview. The girl reporter and the photographer were here for a romance story, the actress's daughter and the best-selling writer; with the background of this lovely country house, and Fleur Sorrel soon appearing in one of Kern McCabe's plays.

Fleur, looking pensive but ravishing, said that indeed it was a surprise, but Philippa's happiness was all her parents cared about; and when Kern arrived he said all the right things, including the

announcement that they were getting married on Philippa's twentieth birthday.

Fleur almost dropped her glass when she heard that. She had opened a bottle of non-vintage champagne for the photographs, and also to keep the press happy. The *Chronicle* was a small local paper, but their entertainments section always did her proud. Now the reporter looked at Fleur in dewy-eyed admiration. 'You and your husband can certainly give them the recipe for a happy marriage, Mrs. Sorrel,' she said; and Fleur smiled sweetly,

'Yes, I think we could do that,' and hoped that no one else saw the irony in Kern McCabe's expression.

He was taking Philippa out that evening. After the press had left Philippa went to change and Kern and Fleur were left alone. 'Kern darling,' she shrugged delicately, 'don't you think you're rather rushing things? Marriage is still supposed to be a long-term arrangement, you know.'

'As yours has been?' he said cynically, and before she had decided how to answer that he said, 'Tuesday week. I hope you and Philip will find the time to come along.'

He was absolutely decisive, no arguments, no hesitation, and Fleur Sorrel knew there was no chance at all that he would agree to postpone the wedding.

When Philippa and Kern had gone she put in a call to Philip and paced the house until it came through. As soon as Philip spoke she said, 'They're getting married on the twenty-eighth of this month,' and went on talking over his exclamations of surprise, 'Philippa's blown her mind, of course. She's starry-eyed and actually looking quite pretty, but of course she doesn't know what's ahead.'

It seemed to Philip that this was turning out surprisingly well. 'I don't know, Philippa won't ask for much. It could--'

'Philippa might not expect too much from life,' said Fleur waspishly, 'but Kern McCabe always has. I told her she wouldn't be able to hold him longer than six months, but she wouldn't listen. She simply didn't believe me.'

'Can we stop her?'

'No, we can't, and it goes without saying that we can't stop McCabe.'

'But if he really wants to marry her he must be fond of her.' Philip still had hope, and Fleur spoke simply, without dramatics. She was not acting. She was truly fearful for Philippa's future,

'Right now I think he's infatuated with her—stranger things have happened. I told her I didn't think it would last longer than six months, but I'm telling you that I think she'll be lucky if it outlasts the honeymoon. And can you see Kern McCabe hanging around a woman who bores him?'

CHAPTER FIVE

THIS was her wedding day. Philippa woke early, and it was here at last. Her birthday which had never meant much, and her wedding day which was like being born again. The days since Kern had asked her to marry him had been crowded, they had never seemed to be alone. That was what today would mean. At the end of this day they would be alone.

She sat up slowly, dreamily, and wished that the wedding was over. She had asked him that first evening she was wearing his ring if they could marry very quietly, and he had smiled and said, 'Why? Who's supposed to be ashamed of who?'

They were driving away from her house to his house. They had just talked to the press, and left her mother, and she'd said, 'You know that's not the reason.'

Kern knew the reason, that she would rather have avoided the fuss, and he said quietly, 'I'm not asking you to dress up in white tulle, love, but I don't want our wedding looking like a hole-and-corner affair.'

That meant that he was proud of her, and goodness knows she was proud of him. She would have faced a firing squad for him, let alone a battery of guests and photographers. She smiled, 'Are you going to let my mother stage-manage it?' and got an answering chuckle.

'We know who'd be the star then, although I don't think she's mad on the script!'

That was where she could say, calmly and casually, 'It was the last thing she expected. She told me about Liliás,' and Kern shrugged.

'Well, that wasn't on the D-list.' But his voice and manner told her it was over now, and that was the only time they had spoken of Liliás Storr.

They should have been having a quiet meal at Kern's that evening, but somehow the news was around. The phone kept ringing and it wasn't quiet, nor were the days and evenings that followed.

When the news reached the national gossip columns Liliast Storr's name cropped up. 'Kern McCabe, best-selling author and long-time escort of fashion writer Liliast Storr, is getting married next week to nineteen-year-old Philippa Sorrel, actress Fleur Sorrel's daughter. Kern and Philippa met for the first time less than a month ago, the day after Liliast flew off to the Bahamas on a working holiday. The announcement was a surprise to Liliast, who told me, "Kern and I parted good friends. Marriage isn't my scene, but I am very happy for him, and I wish them both luck." '

That was the kind of thing that appeared, and Philippa had uncomfortable moments with folk who, she felt, expected blazing beauty and charm, and not a whit less, in the girl for whom Kern McCabe had fallen at first sight. But after today surely they would be left alone to get on with their marriage, and their life together.

There were guests in the house this morning who had arrived yesterday for the wedding. Mostly school friends of Philippa's. Philip and Fleur had issued invitations sparingly and made it clear they were viewing these hasty nuptials with mixed feelings, so that when the crash came no one could say they had been over eager.

In fact on every occasion, and in every interview, Fleur stressed that she and Philip were very fond of Kern, they thought he was quite brilliant and she couldn't be more thrilled to be appearing in his TV play. But they would have liked Kern and Philippa to have taken a little longer to get to know each other before deciding to get married. It was all terribly romantic, and they were terribly in love, and Fleur herself had got married when she was seventeen, but then she and Philip had known each other since childhood.

It was galling to Fleur to have to admit her age publicly, but if she hadn't everyone would have decided that the mother of the bride had to be at least forty. So all she could do was look more beautiful than ever, and if she seemed less than carefree about the wedding that was how both she and Philip felt.

Philippa was touched by their apprehension. It was the first time they had shown any real concern for her, although she wished they were less pessimistic about her chances of happiness with Kern, and she suspected that her mother was thinking of the bad publicity to her own happy-family image in a daughter who couldn't hold a husband.

Fleur was doing a lot of sighing these days, going around with the expression of a tragedy queen, and ever since he'd arrived home Philip had been looking unusually thoughtful. Philippa hoped they would both cheer up and start enjoying themselves again as soon as she was out of the way.

The wedding morning had dawned misty, and by the time her friends were up and about, getting themselves into their finery, helping Philippa into hers, it was thickening rather than clearing.

She hadn't told anyone that she didn't know where she was going for her honeymoon. She had just smiled and promised, 'I'll send you a card when I get there,' but she did know they were flying.

'Still in civilisation?' she had probed, and been told,

'Very much so.' So she had bought lovely expensive exotic things, now packed away in her lightweight cases. She had packed the corn dolly too, to stand on her dressing table.

'Hope it clears,' they were saying all morning. It was general knowledge that the honeymoon was being spent abroad. 'Not in the Bahamas, I hope?' Fleur had giped, but she had only got a smile from Philippa, and no one mentioned the Bahamas to Kern.

Kern phoned, not long before Philippa was due to set off for the register office, and as soon as she had assured him that she was fine and feeling wonderful he asked, 'How's the fog where you are?'

'Fairly thick. Is it general?'

'Looks like it. If the planes are grounded we could be spending our wedding night in London Airport.'

'Oh!' she said.

'No,' he said. 'Tell them to drive you carefully to the register office, because I'll kill anyone who hurts you.'

Nothing could hurt her today. She said softly, 'And if you're driving yourself you take a lot of care.' She was speaking on the hall phone and there was movement all round. The guests were coming back here for the reception. With the expertise of an habitual party-giver Fleur had simply organised another buffet, and Philippa felt that was what it was, another party tonight. She wanted to put down the phone and leave it all and run to find Kern. She whispered, 'I wish it was over. I wish there was only us.'

'There is,' he said, and suddenly it seemed that the people milling around made no sound. She and Kern were locked in a silent secret world. When she put down the phone her father handed her a stiff whisky.

'I don't need this,' she said.

'Everything all right?'

'Yes, of course, apart from the fog.' She had been speaking quietly and looking grave, and she wondered if he thought Kern had phoned up at the eleventh hour to call off, because his face cleared at her reassurance. Then he said,

'Take a sip, there's a good girl, you're looking pale.'

She might have said, 'I have always been pale, you never noticed before.' She took a sip from the glass and then handed it back. 'Thank you,' she said, and Philip Sorrel was asking himself, 'Why couldn't she have settled for Edmund? He'd have made her a better husband than Kern McCabe. If McCabe doesn't treat her well he'll reckon with me.' Like Fleur, twenty years too late, Philip Sorrel was remembering that this girl was his own flesh and blood.

Philippa drove to the register office with her parents, Fleur sitting in the back seat with Lulu, who was a witness and a bridesmaid. The fog was patchy, sometimes it almost blocked out the hedgerows, and Philip drove on fog lamps.

No one talked. Lulu found Philippa's parents overpowering at close quarters, and Philippa's thoughts were flying ahead.

When the car drew up in the forecourt of the rather dreary concrete building that housed births, marriages and death records, there were a couple of press photographers waiting among the group of onlookers, and Fleur switched on her professional practised charm, throwing smiles to right and left as Philippa walked into the building between her father and mother.

Inside the foyer was filled with guests, and standing over there with a crowd around him was a tall, broad-shouldered man with red hair. He turned as Philippa came through the door, but he stood in the shadows and he was like a stranger, as remote and as distant, until he moved forward, coming towards her, smiling at her, turning into her love.

She hurried to meet him, and everyone fell back, and as she reached him an officious-sounding voice from somewhere said, 'This way, please.'

The ceremony and signing were over within minutes, and Philippa had another ring on her finger that fitted her engagement ring perfectly because they had been-designed as a pair, although this was the first time she had seen it. She was married to Kern, and everyone was shaking her hand or kissing her or both, and pictures were being taken, and she could hear her mother telling a reporter about her part in Kern's play, 'Rather an unpleasant lady, but it's a lovely meaty role.'

Then she was in Kern's car and they were driving away, and all the faces peering in were smiling. Until they were into the main road in the main stream of traffic, and then it could have been yesterday, except that she wore new clothes and another ring.

'Alone at last,' sighed Kern.

'I wanted to say that,' protested Philippa.

'Go ahead, it isn't copyright.'

She was trying to act light-hearted, but her hands were shaking, she was trembling like a leaf, and Kern looked down at her now and asked, 'Shall we dodge the reception?'

'I wish we could.' She managed a smile. 'I just want to go now, wherever we're going.'

'We'll collect your cases and say our goodbyes.'

She could leave it all to him. She gave a deep sigh of thankfulness and looked at her rings; her hands had stopped shaking. 'It's a beautiful ring,' she said.

'I'm glad you like it.'

'Would you wear a ring if I bought you one?'

'Sure.'

'I'll do that, then.' They reached her home ahead of most of the other cars—no one with any sense would be speeding today—and the cases were carried down and stacked in the boot while Kern was explaining that because of the weather conditions they had better be on their way. If they couldn't get a plane they'd have to make other arrangements.

Philippa said goodbye to the guests who had arrived. Her parents were there, and Fleur kissed her and Kern, and Philip shook Kern's hand and said, 'Take care of her.'

'I will,' said Kern. And, for all your strength, I will care for you, thought Philippa.

Cars passed them in the drive as they left, one of the drivers stopping, winding down a window and calling, 'Hey!'

'Sorry,' Kern called back. 'Have a drink for us.'

'What are we going to do if we can't get a plane?' Philippa asked as they drove along, with the fog clinging to hedges and trees and swirling in strange patterns over the fields.

'We could drive to London, put up at a hotel overnight and take the first flight out.'

'Where are we going?' she asked.

'Greece.'

She had never been to Greece, and she imagined herself and Kern strolling between moon-dappled ruins like one of those slow-moving TV adverts, when he suddenly asked, 'How do you feel about the top of a Welsh mountain?'

'What?' She'd heard what he'd said. A car's headlights came at them and passed, and he explained,

'I've got this place, I've had it for years. It's rugged, the nearest village is five miles away, and I didn't plan to take you there for a honeymoon, but now—with the planes getting grounded--'

He wanted to go to the house on the mountain, and so did she. They could fly to Greece any time, but she knew from the hesitancy in his voice that this was a place he loved, but he was afraid she might not feel the same way about it.

She remembered the old ruined farm by the Nuns' Well. 'One day,' she had fantasised, 'I'll have a house all on its own, with a stream, and an oil lamp in the window,' and he had looked at her with an expression she couldn't understand, and said, 'You're incredible.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' she asked, and he grinned wryly.

'It was hardly worth declaring. It's a two-up, two-down, with no electricity and no plumbing, and I think-we'd better stick to a hotel tonight and Greece tomorrow.'

'But I want to go to the cottage.' She tugged his arm so that he had to glance down at her. 'Please!'

'Once you get up there you can't just stroll away,' and she laughed.

'If I can't neither can you. All right?'

'All right,' he said. 'We'll stop in Long Medway and I'll do some phoning.'

That was the next village, and while he phoned from a kiosk she went into a grocers and bought food. Mostly tins, because if there was no electricity cooking might be tricky, and a selection from the cooked

meats section. Philippa carried the large cardboard box to the car, and after that she walked up and down, looking in shop windows, smiling at Kern in the phone kiosk.

When he came out he said, 'I've cancelled.'

'We'll have to pay, of course?'

'You don't back out of anything at this stage and get away with it.'

'You don't mind?'

He shook his head. 'I wanted you to want the cottage, but for a honeymoon I thought I'd better give you the kind of background you're used to.' She was used to luxury, but it was love she craved; she could happily dispense with mod cons. 'There's always a fire laid,' said Kern, 'and we'll get the lamps lit.'

'And the food's in the boot.' They walked with her hand through his arm towards the car. 'A fire lit and a lamp burning,' she said softly. 'We're going home, aren't we?' and he held her hand tighter.

'In a way, yes,' he said, and a moment later, 'yes, love, we're going home.'

The fog slowed them, never thick enough to halt progress altogether but always hovering so that driving was hazardous. They didn't stop for a cooked meal. To save time they drew into a parking spot and opened a sliced loaf, butter, and a tin of ham; made sandwiches and drank two tins of lager and lime.

At the end of that Philippa attempted again to get Kern to tell her about the cottage. She had been trying as they drove along, and learned that it had been a shepherd's home at one time, standing empty for years. Kern had got it cheap nearly ten years ago and

written his first book there. He still used it to work in, but when she wanted to know what it looked like he'd kept saying, 'Wait and see.'

'If I started to describe it it would sound rough,' he said now. He didn't sound happy. 'If it's too primitive for you we'll go to Greece tomorrow,' and Philippa gulped her last mouthful of sandwich in a hurry to protest,

'What kind of a lily do you think you've married? I'll have you know I'm tougher than I look.'

'I know you're tough.' He grinned at her, tapping her chin lightly with a finger knuckle. 'That little-girl- lost look doesn't fool me.'

'I hope you're not tougher than you look.' She loved the way he looked, but nobody could mistake him for anything but a hard man.

'Too late to worry now.' Then he sobered. 'I wish...' he began.

'What?'

'I wish I'd told you about the cottage sooner and we'd settled for it.' He picked up the bag of food debris, got out of the car and dumped it in the litter bin. He was still frowning when he returned. As he got into the car he said, 'Then at least I could have arranged for it to be looking a bit more comfortable.'

'I'll love it,' she said eagerly. 'I promise you.'

'Will you?'

He was concerned that she might be disappointed in the place to which he was taking her, but that seemed to her a little worry compared to her growing anxiety that she might prove a disappointment to him. Because although she had closed her mind to

Lilias Storr and the others—whoever the others were—the time was almost here when comparisons might be made.

She was gauche, she knew nothing. How could she be sure that loving would be enough, in these days when everyone seemed to be saying that lovemaking was a skilled science that had to be learned? And she knew nothing. And she wasn't even beautiful.

Her trousseau was beautiful. In it she had hoped it look alluring and glamorous, by day and by night; but everything in her cases would be hopelessly out of place in a rugged cottage. Perhaps it would have been better if they had been in a hotel, with other people near and other places to go.

Too late to worry now, her thoughts echoed Kern's words as she twisted the two rings on her finger, and he put a hand over her hand and said, 'I love you, what are you thinking about?'

'You must be a mind-reader.' Her laughter was husky. 'I was thinking that I love you.' Let nothing ever go wrong, she prayed. I couldn't bear to lose him now.

They came to Wales, along winding roads, through slate-grey villages, the hills getting higher until they were mountain ridges wreathed in fog, looking beautiful and unreal as a painted backcloth.

With a map on her knee Philippa had followed their route, but she almost missed the village. They were through that in no time, and four miles further on Kern turned up a wide track towards a farmhouse. 'This isn't--' Philippa began. 'No, of course not.'

'Hew and Bronwen Lewis live here,' Kern explained. 'They sold me the cottage, and if they see a light up there when the fog lifts they'll be trudging up to see no one's broken in. I'll have a word with them, and bring them out to meet you.'

The woman who opened the door to Kern disappeared into the house, and came out again within a couple of minutes with a man and a basket, and hurried over to the car.

She was smiling and looking worried at the same time, but her lilting voice was welcoming. 'This is a lovely surprise, my dear! We were not expecting to see Kern's wife so soon, but I don't know what you're going to make of that cottage. If he'd let me know I'd have put a light to the fire at least and--'

'I couldn't get through,' Kern said behind her.

'Then you should have tried again,' the farmer's wife scolded him. The basket had eggs and milk, and something covered by a napkin, and she handed it to him and went on smiling at Philippa. 'You're very welcome to stay here,' she said.

'Thank you,' said Philippa, 'but we'll--'

'Of course you'd rather be on your own,' said the farmer. 'Don't act so daft, Bron girl, and it's summer and the place'll be dry.'

'About all it will be.' She gave up and congratulated them both, and stood there waving as they drove on up the track. Kern said,

'Now she's asking Hew why a bloke who should have good money in the bank brings his bride to a hut for their honeymoon.'

Philippa giggled. 'And he's saying, "Don't be daft, Bron girl".'

'You haven't seen it yet,' said Kern. 'You might wish you'd accepted the invitation.'

Where the track petered out they left the car and the climbing started. Philippa carried a case and Kern carried the cardboard box with the food, and they trudged onwards and upwards. The fog was bringing

night down early so that she got no sight of the cottage until they were almost on it. Kern said savagely, 'Why the hell isn't the sun shining? It looks different when the sun's shining.'

'If the sun was shining we wouldn't be here,' she reminded him, smiling. 'Stop scaring me. It isn't a cave, is it?'

It was a small square stone house, with rough wooden shutters over the lower windows so that it looked closed to the world. He turned the key. The door creaked as he pushed it open and beyond was blackness. 'Shall I light the lamps and open the shutters,' he asked, 'or carry you into the dark?'

He picked her up and carried her over the threshold and she was tense in his arms, not afraid but tense, and he kissed her lightly and set her on her feet again.

'It's always cold in here, but it warms up quickly when a fire's lit,' he said. 'Stay right where you are.'

He went outside again, opening the shutters that let in a pale grey light, bringing in the case and the box of food. Philippa turned, looking about her, straining to see; and as he put matches to a couple of oil lamps, another to a fire in an old black cooking range, the room and its contents took shape.

The walls were the same rough stone as the outside walls, the ceiling was black-beamed and smoke-darkened. There were a couple of wooden chairs and a big wooden table, a dresser, and a grey flagstoned floor. It could hardly have been starker, but the flames leapt and crackled in the fireplace. Oh yes, she thought, oh yes\

Kern was saying, 'There's a kitchen of sorts through here, an outside lavatory, and a couple of rooms upstairs. Just basics, I'm afraid.'

'I knew that mews house was too smooth to be true,' she said. 'Can I boil a kettle? Where do we get the water?'

'From the stream—I'll get it.' He brought a plastic bucket and drum from the kitchen-of-sorts. They had passed several streams, one only about two hundred yards from the house. By the time he was back Philippa had found a couple of mugs, several plates and three tumblers in the kitchen cupboard. There were tins of food there too, as well as the food she had bought, and the various salamis and the cooked chicken and the pie that Bron had given them. She had also bought two bottles of wine, and certainly one of those was for now.

As Kern walked in she said, 'I wonder if anyone would like a testimonial that St. Edyth's Wishing Well guarantees results.'

He drew her to him. 'That explains it. I'm bewitched.' He touched the back of her head gently, warm strong fingers moving down and along her neck where the tension was, smoothing the tiny ache away. 'You won't be wanting your other case tonight, will you?' he asked. It was still in the car, and she shook her head. It wouldn't be much use here when she did get it: a silver lame bikini, pantaloons in panne velvet, things like that.

'I'll take this up,' he said, and picked up the case. A door led to the stairs and he took one of the lamps. Philippa didn't know whether she should have followed. She felt that a woman who had any confidence in herself would have done, if only to look around upstairs, open her case and take out a few things. But she couldn't.

If he had held out a hand, or even looked back for her, she would have followed him; the stairs didn't seem wide enough for two to climb together. But he just took case and lamp and went, and she began unpacking the food, by the light of the fire and the remaining lamp, and setting the table. She was going through drawers in the dresser

when she heard him coming down the wooden stairs again and she said brightly, 'Don't tell me you don't have a corkscrew.'

'I warned you it was primitive. You bite the neck off the bottles up here.' He took the bottle from her. She was holding it so tightly with rigid fingers that it was a moment before she could release it, but he didn't seem to notice.

She was laughing with him as he brought a corkscrew from the cupboard in the kitchen and opened the wine, drawing the cork deftly and easily. He poured some into the tumblers and she said, 'I don't know what it's like. I got it from the grocers in Long Medway. Red, because you like red, don't you? And so do I but I think that could be because it looks prettier than white.' She took a sip, and another because the wine should help relax her, and Kern said,

'Now she tells me! I've married a dipsomaniac.'

That made her laugh again. She was so happy it hurt, and she wanted him to love her more than she had ever wanted anything, but it was the first time for her and she was shy, and yes, she was scared. She babbled, 'I brought the corn dolly with me. I was going to put her on my dressing table. I've had her on my dressing table ever since you gave her to me.'

'There isn't a dressing table,' said Kern.

'I'll put her down here, then.'

'She'll give the place style.' He was smiling at her, and she said,

'I'll fetch her. She's in my case.'

'Take the lamp.' This time he stayed where he was and Philippa lit her way up the creaking stairs, coming straight up into the bedroom.

There was nothing here, but a largish bed, a chair, a wooden chest and a cupboard that was probably a wardrobe.

She put the lamp on the chest, by the window, and opened the case. In here she had the dress she had planned to wear this evening for dinner. It was in very fine turquoise chiffon, long, with floating sleeves, fastened with a slip-through tie belt that moulded the front of the dress to her firm young breasts and showed her slim waist, and let the back of the dress fall loosely from her shoulders.

'It's devastating with a body stocking if you've got the figure for it, and you have,' the assistant had told her, but she had bought a matching slip. It was flattering to be told she had the figure, but she hadn't the nerve to wear body stockings under nearly see-through dresses.

She had silver sandals, and she searched for them frantically, the carefully packed contents of her case, between their layers of tissue paper, spilling out on bed and floor. She would feel lovelier, it would be easier, when she was glamorously dressed.

The dress, the petticoat, the sandals. Already the oil lamp had taken the chill off the room, but she was still shivering as she kicked off her brown suede one-bar shoes, slipped her arms out of the brown velvet jacket and wriggled out of the narrow camel dress. Kern might smile when he saw her in this, but that wouldn't matter, his laughter would be kind, her finery would be a shared joke; and after she had drunk some more wine she would surely stop feeling like a Victorian bride. Or perhaps brides always felt the same, no matter how liberated and emancipated they were.

The dress was beautiful. There wasn't a mirror up here, so she couldn't see, but she remembered how she had looked when she'd tried it on and she picked up a silver sandal.

Then Kern called, 'Philippa!' The door at the bottom of the stairs hadn't been closed. She saw him, shadowy in the mellow light, and she tried to call back, 'I'm coming!' but the words stuck, and he came up the stairs and she dropped the sandal and stood there.

He stepped on to the floorboards of the bedroom and said, 'You look beautiful.'

'Thank you. I—wanted to be. You—won't expect too much from me, will you?'

'No?' She was barefooted, which made her shorter than ever. So that when he took her in his arms her cheek was where his heart beat, and his heart was racing.

'It's the first time for me.' Her voice was so muffled that she hardly thought he would hear. She felt his lips in her hair,

'That's a terrible confession,' he teased her gently, and she begged,

'Please don't laugh.'

'I'm not laughing.'

She kept her eyes closed. 'I love you,' she whispered, 'but I know nothing about—pleasing a man. Is loving enough?'

'More than enough.' His fingers trembled as he touched her, and the dress slipped from her, and she stood still, her senses swimming, winding her arms around his neck as he lifted her and carried her.

They said there was sometimes pain, but if there was the passion his loving released, surging through every nerve in her body, took her to an ecstasy of sensation beyond pain. She had never believed there could be such closeness, such complete sharing, transporting her with

a joyous rapture, out of this world, dreamlike except that even in dreams it had never been like this.

And when she had woken from dreams she had always been alone. But when she woke this time, from a deep dreamless sleep, Kern's arm was around her.

The lamp was out. There was only the small grey square of window, but there was no moment when she wondered—where am I? As soon as she opened her eyes she knew that she was the only place she ever wanted to be, with the man who was her husband. As she stirred he said, 'Hello, love.'

He was awake, lying there, watching her, smiling at her when she turned her face. She could see his smile in the darkness. 'What time is it?' she whispered, and he whispered back,

'Why? We're not going anywhere.'

'Did the lamp go out?'

'I turned it out.'

While she slept. She said drowsily, 'I ought to unpack my case properly. Those clothes cost a lot of money.'

'I've put some in the cupboard,' he said. 'I'll get you some coathangers tomorrow.'

She giggled, her lips tickling his cheek. 'Luxury! The rot's setting in. I'll be expecting wall-to-wall carpeting next.'

'I tell you what I will buy you—a new mattress. This one's horsehair.'

Now he mentioned it it was just about the hardest, lumpiest mattress she had ever encountered. She felt it with the flat palm of her hand, and asked, 'Did they get the horse out?'

'If they didn't,' he said, 'he's been quiet for the last ten years.'

'Yuk! Could we get a mattress delivered up here?'

'We'll bring it up in the car as far as we can and carry it.' He chuckled, 'That should please Bron if she sees us. She'll think you took one look at this bed and sat up all night, and serve me right for bringing you here.'

He had brought no other woman to this place. In a way tonight had been a first time for Kern too, and tenderness filled her as she nestled against him. 'Are you hungry?' she asked.

'Ravenous!' He pretended to bite her ear, and she laughed, wriggling her head back.

'For *food*. I'm starving.'

'So am I.' He sounded surprised. 'Put some shoes on, the floorboards are rough up here.'

'I'm putting more than shoes on,' she said.

'Pity.' He kissed her soundly. 'Sensible girl, though, I don't want you catching your death. Wait till I light the lamp.'

Broad shoulders and narrow hips, a body of lean rippling strength that stirred her with wonder and love. She watched him light the lamp, and as he put on a robe she reached for the first nightdress that came to hand out of her case. They were all exquisite, she had chosen them all so carefully. This was the Italian one, very low-necked in fine lawn, pale pink with deeper pink flowers embroidered down the

front, neckline and hemline scalloped. She put on her white satin dressing gown, tying the sash at the waist, and the silver sandals, and Kern who was standing by the window said, ' "She walks in beauty like the night". What were you doing around in Byron's day?'

Philippa shook her head, 'If you weren't there, I wasn't,' and he came across, and curled a tendril of her hair round one of his fingers.

'I hope I didn't dream you,' he said. 'And watch how you go in those heels. The stairs--'

'I know,' she said, 'the stairs are rough.'

The meal was as she had left it. Everything was, except that there was a black kettle steaming gently on the hob. They stirred up the fire and replenished it, and hung the kettle on the hook and chain over the fire, and when it boiled made instant coffee in mugs. They ate Bronwen's pie, which turned out to be blackberry and apple and was very good, and saw off the chicken and half the sliced loaf, and most of the cooked meats and the bottle of wine.

'While we're down there buying that mattress,' said Philippa, 'I must get myself some jeans and a shirt or two. I thought I should be loafing around in a four- star hotel.'

'You could have been.' Kern watched her over his mug of coffee. 'You still could.' Then he smiled. 'And a raincoat,' he added, 'for if the fog doesn't lift.'

But when morning came the fog had gone, and the mountains were bathed in sunshine. After breakfast they walked to the car, bringing up the cases that remained, then back again to drive towards the coast and the nearest bigish shopping centre.

It was a holiday resort and Philippa stopped at a display of picture postcards to say, 'I think they'll be expecting to hear from one of the faraway places.'

'They shouldn't be expecting cards at all from honeymooners.' Kern steered her clear. 'What do they want you to write? Wish you were here?'

'Not a chance,' she grinned.

They bought the mattress and nylon sheets, a pair of lilac and a pair of candy-striped, and Philippa smiled mischievously as she selected the colours. She got herself some blue jeans, and a green cotton skirt, and several tops, and said as they stepped into the car with the clothes, 'I bought such gorgeous things for my trousseau. It seems a pity not to wear them. Shall I dress up for dinner?'

It was a joke, of course, those clothes weren't suitable for the cottage, but while Kern was cooking sausages for supper on the old black range she put on a lace blouse with her green cotton skirt, and he didn't laugh. She was beautiful for him. High and safe on the mountain she was in a kingdom where she was queen, where no other woman had ruled.

Some of the clothes she deliberately donned for laughs. When she came down in the panne velvet pantaloons, with the gold halter-necked top, she did a mock Eastern dance, waving sinuous hands, and swaying from the hips, and Kern said, 'Interesting.'

'Thank you.' She danced around him. 'I'm the sultan's favourite,' and he caught her, as she knew he would.

'I'm not surprised,' he said. 'I'll break the sultan's neck.'

It was crazy, but she had a lovely time wearing her trousseau. In every way she had a lovely time. More practically she learned to cook

on that little black range. You could leave a casserole in the side oven when you went out in the morning, and it was ready when you came home again.

When you came home ... that was the best part of every day. The weather stayed fine, and sometimes they walked on the mountains, over the grasses and ferns, following streams and tracks, meeting black cows and occasional sheep. Kern knew his way around this country, and the air was sharp and sweet. And then they came home...

Sometimes they went sightseeing, to old ruined castles on lonely hills, to churches with beautiful carvings that were shadowy, empty and quiet. Sometimes to towns and beauty spots that were crowded, but even in crowds Philippa felt that they were alone.

'I wish there was just us,' she had said the day they married, and Kern had told her, 'There is.'

It was surely true that week. Even Bronwen and Hew,-when they called at the farm for milk and went inside and sat awhile and talked, didn't seem quite real, just smiling shades. The reality was the feel of Kern's hands around her fingers, the sound of his voice. The sharing, the loving, that was what was real.

She had a lot to learn about him and some of it would take a lifetime. But she knew now that his parents had been killed in a car crash when he was a child, and that he had been reared by his grandfather in a mining valley village that was at the end of its tether. His grandfather died when he was sixteen and Kern went into the Merchant Navy. Four years and a couple of TV plays later he bought this cottage, wrote his first book, and struck oil.

That was what he said. He had gone on writing, and living, and Philippa knew that it might be a long time before she would have him

completely to herself again when work and the outside world took over. But she was happy that week, and so was he.

On their last evening they went out for a meal to a fishing inn, built on a spur of rock overlooking a craggy bay, and watched the moonlight on the water as they ate their dinner. Then they came home. Philippa hung on to Kern's arm as they climbed the mountain, and he lifted her over the rougher patches, smiling at her, kissing her, and they could see their cottage in the moonlight waiting for them.

At the doorway she said, 'I wish we didn't have to go back. We could live here. You could write here.' But she knew they couldn't really shut out the world.

'We can come again any time,' Kern promised her. The firelight welcomed them, and he lit the lamps as she stood in the doorway. There were no lights, except passing cars far below. Other mountains shielded villages and towns, and the farmhouse was dark. Kern came, to put gentle hands on her shoulders and turn her to face him and say, 'Thank you for this week, my love.'

'Thank you.' My love, my dearest love, for everything. She asked him, 'Do you believe that life evens out, and happiness has to be paid for?'

'No.' He shook his head and held her close, and she was safe. But if you did have to pay for happiness she dared not think what kind of a reckoning was due, and she knew that she didn't want to go back to the world.

CHAPTER SIX

IN every way the house in the mews differed from the house on the mountain. During her week there Philippa had bought all sorts of odds and ends: pots and pans and kitchen tools, pretty china, a vase for the wild flowers she'd gathered. Next time she would take cushions and rugs. But this place was fully equipped, lacking nothing. Not that it wasn't a super home; there was food prepared and ready, and Mrs. Harris had put a bowl of roses on the table that was laid for a meal.

There was also a pile of mail on the long teak sideboard. Kern carried the cases into the bedroom, and then went to the mail, while Philippa hovered, although she wasn't expecting anyone would write to her here. 'Nothing for me, I suppose?' she asked, and he glanced through and said,

'Doesn't seem like it.'

She followed his glance, and knew there was no reason to suspect that the big square white envelope was from Liliass Storr, and it was ridiculous to imagine she smelled the perfume that had been in Kern's car that first day. She didn't even know that the perfume was Liliass's, and she went to the bowl of roses and breathed deep over a rose of deepest red. Of course it was the roses she could smell now.

Kern was reading his mail as she picked up the phone and dialled her old home. Her mother answered. Phones ringing in that household usually were for Fleur, and in any case she liked answering them.

'Hello, darling, everything all right?' Fleur asked as soon as Philippa had identified herself, sounding so apprehensive that Philippa bit back a crazy impulse to say, 'Actually I've discovered that Kern already has a wife and six children,' and said, 'Yes, of course.'

She learned there were some letters for her, and another couple of wedding presents, and said, 'I'll try to get over tomorrow.' Kern was looking her way now and he shook his head as she raised her eyebrows. 'Just me,' she said.

'Just you,' Fleur echoed. 'So the honeymoon's over?'

Philippa wished her mother hadn't said that. She said, 'I'll see you tomorrow, then,' and Fleur said,

'I might not be around, darling, we're into rehearsals, and during the afternoon I think Philip's going over to...'

'It will be in the morning,' said Philippa, 'and of course I wouldn't expect you to stay in for me. I hope the rehearsals are going well. Bye.' She put down the receiver and Kern asked,

'Anything new?'

'Not a thing,' said Philippa. But it didn't hurt now.

As she put down the phone Kern picked it up and began to dial a number. One of the letters had been from the man who had seen one of those early TV plays, got in touch with Kern McCabe and had first option on the book he was starting to write. From that had stemmed a friendship and a business relationship covering ten years, and a string of rip-roaring bestsellers.

James Barstow sent congratulations on Kern's marriage and his heartfelt hope that wedlock would not disrupt the professional routine.

Philippa hadn't read the letter, but as the two men talked she guessed what was in it, and that Kern was almost as anxious to get back to his typewriter as his publisher was to have him there. When he rang off he went into his study.

She had seen inside the study, and although the filing wasn't on the floor—as Kern had told her the first time she came here—she could understand why he allowed no one to touch or tidy. There was a tall cabinet of files, shelves of cassettes, tape recorder, electric typewriter, papers stacked, maps on the walls; creative chaos linked with a disciplined efficiency. It was a workroom cut off from outside distractions. The window overlooked the mews below, but one would have had to stand to see through it.

She wasn't asked in now, and as Kern picked up some papers from the desk she closed the door quietly. Tonight he would probably only look around, maybe re-read a little, but she didn't want him to shut the door on her; better to shut it herself.

She unpacked. The bedroom had plenty of fitted wardrobe space and she hung all her things in an empty one, leaving Kern's case. He had hardly unpacked at the cottage. He had clothes there which he had worn, oldish comfortable things that were fine for the mountains.

Philippa put the corn dolly on the dressing table, and was glad she had brought it away with her. She had nearly left it behind to watch over the cottage, but at the last minute, when the shutters were closed and the room was dark and they were shutting the front door, she had dashed back in to scoop up the corn dolly. Kern had teased her, 'If the place was on fire would that be your priority?' and she had laughed.

'Why not? Corn dollies are very combustible.'

'We're still home,' she told the corn dolly now. 'It looks different, but it's home as long as Kern's in the next room.'

And of course it was, and without doing anything drastic to the place Philippa planned to put her own mark on it. Mostly in the simplest way of all by looking after Kern so that he couldn't imagine home without her. Mrs. Harris, who had done the cleaning and the

household shopping ever since Kern moved in, would still be coming, but Philippa would prepare the meals, and from an average cook—who hadn't had much practice—she planned to develop into a super cook as soon as possible.

She was also going to look for a job. It was too far to get over to the play-school each day, and they had managed to recruit a third young mother to help, but Kern worked in the mornings and Philippa would need some occupation. Something in an office she thought. At the end of her course her speeds had been good, and there was an idea at the back of her mind that one day Kern would agree he could do with a secretary. He always worked alone and when, coming back in the car today, she had suggested she might do some typing for him, he'd said that he wasn't geared to dictation.

But he used a dictating machine, and if he knew that she was really efficient he might change his mind. She was into a new life now, and she had a new confidence in herself and no doubts that she would be able to cope.

The chance of a job came out of the blue. The day after their return home some friends of Kern's came round. He had a knack of making friends. Those who hadn't already met Philippa probably came to get a look at her, and there must have been a dozen, all uninvited but considering themselves on 'dropping in' terms, in the big open plan room, sitting around with a drink, talking nineteen to the dozen.

Philippa rustled up finger food from the kitchen and handed it round, and they were Kern's friends and she was pleased to see them, although they probably all knew Liliastorr and were still wondering why Kern had married Philippa.

One of them was Roy Wesk, a lawyer, about Kern's age. He was quite nice-looking, with a rather solemn expression and blunt regular features; and Philippa thought it likely that most of his cases were

routine, because he looked a plodder rather than a trail-blazer, prosperous but in no way outstanding.

He caught her eye at the very moment she was deciding this, and she went across and offered him a sandwich, and was amused to learn that her guess was right. She hadn't met him till this evening, so she sat down because there was a seat vacant, and they chatted.

No, he said, his job wasn't very exciting, mainly property conveyance, traffic offences, making out wills, that sort of thing. It was an old family firm, started by his grandfather, and not much had changed in fifty years, except that now you couldn't get good office staff for love nor money. They had been advertising for a shorthand-typist for over a month.

Philippa fished for information, without revealing that she might be personally interested, and learned that the hours could be mornings only, and the pay was fair, and the office was in walking distance. Then she said, 'I know someone who might suit,' and he brightened and urged,

'Send her along.'

'Me.' She told him her speeds and he said,

'Well, yes, that would be grand. Is it all right by Kern?'

'You think I should get his permission?' She was joking, but Roy Wesk was protesting,

'I didn't mean--' as she beckoned Kern over to ask him,

'Do you mind if I take a job? Mornings only.'

He grinned at her and patted her cheek, and his touch made her fingers and toes tingle the way it always did. 'That's why I married

you,' he said. 'To put you out to work to keep me in beer and skittles. What kind of job?'

Later, when they had all gone and she lay in his arms, he told her, 'You could find working for old Roy a drag. He's no legal eagle.'

'It's funny,' she said, 'but I was looking at him and thinking—there's a nice solid sort of lawyer, I'll bet he doesn't go in for courtroom fireworks. Then I went over and asked him about his work, and the first thing he told me was that it was pretty dull.'

'And you still want to work for him?'

'Why not? I've never worked in a lawyer's office, it might be interesting.' She dug her chin into his shoulder, her lips against his ear. 'And I expect to find all the excitement I need right here.'

'Right here,' said Kern, kissing her slowly, with pleasurable increasing passion, 'is where the fireworks are.'

Next day she reported to Wesk and Wesk and the job fitted like a glove. It was exactly what she needed, enough work to occupy her mornings at full stretch, and a small friendly staff.

By the end of the week Roy Wesk was congratulating himself because Philippa McCabe was proving a real find, a girl who was both attractive and efficient. But he was still surprised that Kern McCabe had married her and not Liliastorr.

Philippa was completely and gloriously happy. The house, with Mrs. Harris's help, ran on oiled wheels. Mornings Kern was shut in his study and Philippa took herself off to Wesk and Wesk, and if the work wasn't exciting it wasn't too dull. She enjoyed realising her potential, even in matters like transcribing shorthand notes quickly and accurately, staying cool when flaps threatened in the office. At home every meal she prepared, every chore she did, was a labour of

love, and fun. That was what life was those first months, love and shared laughter.

She bought Kern a signet ring, measuring his finger with a piece of string and presenting him with the ring four weeks to the day from their marriage. He gave her a gold-plated key to the cottage, on a chain to hang round her neck so that she could wear it and pretend it was just a key charm, because no one else knew about the cottage. They had told everyone they had toured Wales for their honeymoon, and the key represented a secret that nobody else could share.

When Kern began to work afternoons as well as mornings Philippa sometimes slipped over and gave a hand at the play-school, or went shopping or visiting in the town where they lived. Waiting for the evenings. Her life was built around Kern, and his around her, of course, although when he was working he was in a land of his own creation where she couldn't follow.

Most of her new friends were Kern's friends. In the evenings they often entertained, and when they went out to other peoples' homes she wondered each time if this would be the night she would meet Liliass Storr. But Liliass lived in London, and had probably only come to this town in the Cotswolds to be with Kern, so she might not come here again. Nobody spoke about her to Philippa, but Philippa looked for her fashion articles in newspapers and magazines now. Not meaning to, not wanting to, and never without hoping that Kern wouldn't glance at that particular page.

Once she overheard the name said at a party, when a woman asked the hostess, 'Is Liliass Storr here?'

'She couldn't make it,' the hostess said, and Philippa turned away, unnoticed in the crush, but still hearing their voices.

'Couldn't or wouldn't? I never expected Liliass to give Kern up this easily.'

'She could be biding her time.' There was laughter, and Philippa went to find Kern, staying close to him so that when he whispered,

'I've had about enough of this, shall we go?' she could nod and they could slip away together.

That evening she needed to get away, and when they were back in their own home she turned to him with something more than the relief of being alone again, so that he reached to draw her to him and ask, 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing, except that I'm rather tired. I'm glad it's not work in the morning.'

It was a Saturday night, and he said, 'You rest tomorrow, I'll do the cooking.'

'You mean I'm showing the strains of being an old married woman?' In his arms, with him caring for her, she was radiant again, and he laughed.

'For an old married woman you're looking indecently dished.'

'For an old married man you're not so bad yourself.' When he was old and his hair was grey and the lines were deeper in his face his eyes would still hold humour and the excitement of the unexpected. And I'll still be nuts about you, Philippa thought wryly.

She wouldn't give another thought to Liliass Storr. She would wipe what she had overheard tonight completely from her mind. But of course she couldn't. 'Biding her time' had a sinister sound. It made you think of someone smiling in the shadows, knowing they only had to wait a while and their time would come.

For Philippa life whirled on through that first summer of her marriage. Kern had boundless energy, and the harder he worked the more restless he seemed, so that they spent few quiet evenings at home. The hours she passed in the law offices of Wesk and Wesk were the humdrum part of Philippa's life. All the excitement, the exhilaration, stemmed from Kern.

Philippa carried happiness with her in those days, and everyone who had known her before she married kept telling her how marvellous she looked.

'Marriage seems to be suiting her,' her father said, after Philippa had called in one afternoon and caught both her parents at home. But her mother shrugged thin shoulders and drawled,

'You're not expecting it to go on like this, are you? Philippa may have changed, my darling, but Kern McCabe certainly has not.'

She didn't say that to Philippa. If she had Philippa would only have laughed. But, self-centred and shallow though she was, this time Fleur Sorrel was right. As surely as the summer was ending so were the golden days for Philippa. The winter and the cold were coming...

Philippa could have named the moment the first chill struck her heart, and that was when she met Liliias. At a barbecue, in a field and a barn of an old Tudor farmhouse. An outdoor oven had been built with bricks, and sausages and steaks were sizzling over a charcoal fire. There were beer barrels and cider jars and jugs of punch set out on trestle tables, and it was a warm beautiful evening. Not autumn yet, late summer, the light just beginning to fade.

Philippa knew most of the guests and this looked like being a relaxing and pleasant evening. Laura and Roland Cranston, the hosts, greeted her and Kern as they came across the meadow from the house where the cars were parked. A hillbilly group, sitting on bales of straw, were

warming up with tankards of cider, and there was a tall girl helping with the cooking.

She was wearing a long black cotton skirt, with giant poppies applied on it, and a scarlet silk shirt, and she waited for them. She had been turning steaks on the grid, but as Kern spoke to Laura and Roland she straightened, put down the meat tongs and moved away from the barbecue, and waited, looking at Kern. She had a beautiful sulky face, and that was when Philippa recognised her as Liliias.

She and Kern spoke to some of the other guests, they stood for a moment or two here and there, but Liliias waited, and as they came closer Philippa's smile became wider, her mouth dryer.

She wondered what Kern was feeling. He gave no sign of stress, and yet if this was the first time he and Liliias had met since they parted, the day before he met Philippa, it must be an awkward moment.

Apart from the hillbilly group, thought Philippa, stiff with tension, nearly everybody here will know. They'll all be watching, even the ones who seem to have their backs to us will be peering round through the corners of their eyes. Well, she's certainly beautiful, wljy the dickens *did* he marry me?

'Hello,' said Liliias.

'Hello,' said Kern.

'Introduce me,' said Liliias.

'Philippa ... Liliias..

Two smiling faces, and a sudden hush all around, then sound swirling back into the silence, and Liliias pointing to the stack of plates and offering them food. 'Rare as always.' She put a steak on Kern's plate and asked Philippa, 'How about you?'

'Whatever comes,' said Philippa, and Liliás smiled again.

'No preference? You're an easy girl to please.' But she gave Philippa a nice piece of medium cooked so no one could have said she was being catty.

No one could have said anything. That first meeting seemed casual and friendly, and so did the whole evening, Philippa should have enjoyed it. Except that she couldn't get the suspicion out of her head that this wasn't their first meeting since Kern had married Philippa.

Or perhaps there had been letters, phone calls. It shouldn't matter if there had, because Philippa was Kern's wife, he loved her; but in the way Liliás had looked up when she heard Kern's voice, and stood there waiting for him, there had been a sort of calm confidence.

She was every bit as striking as Philippa had feared she might be. She and Kern must have made a fantastic pair, and although they weren't together tonight they seemed to be because, somehow, they were never far apart. There was supposed to be country dancing, but hardly anyone knew the steps, and when the stars came out it was pleasanter in the open air, around the fire, than in the barn, for all the coloured lamps hanging on the rafters.

So everyone sat around the fire, including the hillbilly group, and Liliás was sitting near Kern. So was Philippa, even nearer, but tonight she had the impression of being edged out, pushed into the background. Not by Kern, by Liliás, and not obviously. In a very subtle way, with in jokes that made no sense to Philippa but had half the company rocking with laughter. By talking about places that had nothing to do with Philippa, and people she had never met, so that she sat silent, knowing that she was probably being over-touchy, imagining that Liliás was deliberately trying to upstage her. It was much more likely that Liliás didn't give her a thought, except as the girl Kern had inexplicably married.

She wasn't holding marriage against him. She touched him, and laughed with him, as though they were still on the friendliest of terms. 'Marriage isn't my scene,' Liliias had said in that newspaper quote, as if they were discussing a quaint old custom. She was no respecter of marriage. So far as she was concerned Kern was still available.

That was how Philippa was seeing it, and for the first time she was racked with jealousy, hurting so that she could have whimpered like a battered child. She held the gold key so tightly that it cut into her hand, and when she loosed it and it swung on its golden chain, Liliias said, 'That's unusual. Did Kern give it to you?'

'Yes.' How did she know? Why had she asked that?

'He never gave me a *gold-plated* key,' Liliias said, as though she had been short-changed, and everyone laughed with her.

What key did he give you? Philippa wanted to ask. To his car? To his home? Do you still have the key he gave you? But if she hadn't smiled too she would have seemed naive, and they'd have known she was jealous. It wasn't a joke in the best of taste, but it was a joke and she smiled with clenched teeth, and somebody said-Something about buying gold nuggets as an investment and the joke was forgotten.

But not by Philippa, which was probably what Liliias intended. When they were making for their cars and home Liliias fell into step by Philippa and asked her quietly, 'How does it feel to have hitched your wagon to a star?'

'Wonderful,' said Philippa softly.

'Perhaps hitched your wagon to a whirlwind would be a truer description.' Liliias's voice was low, her eyes were on Kern a little ahead. 'And I don't think, somehow, you're going to stand the pace.'

Before Philippa could answer that she had walked away, catching Kern up, putting a hand on his arm and her face close to his for a few words. Then she was between Laura and Roland Cranston, who were guiding out the cars and waving goodbyes.

As soon as Philippa and Kern reached the road Philippa said, 'Lilias Storr is very beautiful.'

'Yes,' said Kern, watching the traffic as their car moved in the stream of departing guests.

'What did she say to you just now?'

'When?'

'Just before you got into the car.'

'Goodnight,' said Kern.

She should leave it, she knew, but she desperately wanted him to tell her, 'Lilias is the past and over.' That was what she believed, but she needed reassurance, and some of her new-won confidence had been undermined tonight so that she couldn't say, 'I love you, please tell me you love me.' Instead she said, 'You didn't seem surprised she was at the barbecue. Were you expecting her there?'

'It is her sister's house,' said Kern, and Philippa gasped.

'Laura Cranston?'

'Yes.' No one had told her that. No one had told her anything about Lilias, except her mother and what she had read in the press. She didn't know Laura Cranston well, she had just met her sometimes in other people's houses, she hadn't dreamt she was Lilias Storr's sister.

But this meant that Liliias had a home in this town when she wanted it, as well as that London flat. She had kept out of Kern's way, so far as Philippa knew, since his marriage. But if she had been biding her time she was back now, and Philippa had a sickening pre-monition that they were going to see a lot more of her.

Roy Wesk hadn't been at the barbecue, but he had seemed thoughtful when Philippa had mentioned it, and of course he must know that Laura was Liliias's sister. Next morning, as he passed Philippa's desk in the outer office, he asked, 'Enjoy yourself last night?'

'I met some interesting people,' she said. He knew what she meant by 'interesting' and looked so concerned that she beamed broadly at him as though he was the one who needed cheering up. She liked Roy. He was a bachelor, still living at home, and not very lucky in love, according to the motherly lady who was his secretary.

Until now Philippa would have said that her married life was pretty nearly perfect, but Liliias Storr was a very real threat. Kern might not admit it, but Roy Wesk did, just by his expression when he realised that Liliias had been at that barbecue.

Now, when Kern and Philippa were invited out, sometimes Liliias was there. Not always by any means, but often enough to keep Philippa at constant tension. And when she was Philippa was afraid to leave Kern's side because Liliias always seemed to be whispering to him. Maybe Philippa imagined that, but she didn't imagine the amused astonishment in Liliias's eyes. Something like the way her mother used to look at her. 'How can this be my daughter?' Fleur always seemed to be wondering, and Liliias Storr wondered now, 'How can this be Kern's wife?'

Kern loves me, Philippa told herself constantly. He married me. But *why?* she was asking herself now, instead of just accepting it as a lovely miracle. Kern McCabe and Lillas Storr had been together for nearly a year, and it was one thing to tell herself the past didn't matter, another to see them together again, even if it was in a crowded room.

When Lillas had been around Philippa would lie beside Kern in the darkness, and wonder if the time would ever come when he would whisper Lillas's name, in love or in sleep.

She was not looking for heartache, heaven knows, but now when she looked about her clearly she saw things that frightened her. Sometimes Kern walked out of the house and vanished for hours, and she didn't know where he went. Sometimes it was late at night, and if she asked if she could tag along he'd say no, he needed to be alone, that she should go to bed and go to sleep.

Perhaps it was to clear his head, to get his thoughts in order. Even Mrs. Harris had warned her he could be irritable when he was working hard. Friends had said he could be a swine, smiling but meaning it, saying they understood when sometimes Philippa phoned to cancel appointments.

'You go,' Kern would say, and sometimes, unwillingly, she did. But she noticed that Lillas never turned up if Kern didn't. Not once. That could have been coincidence. Like the phone calls.

Sometimes Kern answered the phone and she wondered who it was, and it could have been Lillas, although if she asked him he never said it was. And the wrong numbers. When Philippa spoke the caller hung up. Wrong numbers happen on any phone, but perhaps the caller hadn't expected a woman to answer.

There was the perfume too. It had been Lillas', that haunting fragrance in Kern's car; Lillas was still using it, and sometimes it

seemed to Philippa that it clung to Kern's clothes. She tried to believe she was making a fool of herself, you could easily imagine a perfume. But she looked for lipstick on collars, a woman's long dark hair on the shoulder of his jacket.

She found nothing. If she had she didn't know what she could have done. There was no one she could talk to about this, and maybe she imagined that the folk who knew Kern and Liliias were looking at her now with a little pity.

Apart from being preoccupied, and spending more time alone—that is, more time away from Philippa— she couldn't honestly say that Kern had changed. He was as exciting, as generous. When he made love to her it was still unbelievably wonderful, but that didn't mean it was the same for him. Philippa had taken it for granted that she made him happy, and she did, but she didn't know what kind of happiness he and Liliias had shared.

She had known Kern for five months, been married to him for four, and she was facing it now—she didn't really know him at all. Friends who had known him longer probably knew him better.

Roy Wesk, for instance. Roy's sympathies were with Philippa now that Liliias Storr was around again. Philippa seemed the kind of girl Roy would have liked to marry himself, but he considered that Kern McCabe had married on impulse and would start regretting it soon.

When Roy's secretary took her annual holiday—she always went to Spain in the off season when the rates were reduced—he asked Philippa if she could work afternoons. 'All right,' she agreed. 'Kern's busy all day now, so I might as well be here.'

'Kern's busy, is he?' said Roy with a wealth of meaning. He made a long face, and fiddled with his pen as though Philippa was asking him

to represent her in a divorce action and he was about to make notes, and she said quickly, smiling,

'Working. What did someone say about genius being ten per cent inspiration and ninety per cent perspiration?' She could do without Roy's pity, but she got no smile from him. Instead he said glumly,

'I don't know about perspiration and inspiration. It seems to me that ruthlessness is what you need for success these days. If you're hard enough, with yourself and everybody else, you can get to the top and stay there.'

She couldn't deny that Kern was tough, but she wasn't discussing him with Roy. She said lightly, 'Talent doesn't come into it at all, then?' and that made him stutter,

'Kern has immense talent, of course. I'm not suggesting for a moment that he hasn't.' Then he got on with signing the letters she had just brought in for signature.

Philippa pretended she was amused, but it wasn't funny that Roy should believe that Kern was neglecting her. Perhaps it was a general impression. Perhaps outsiders knew more about her marriage than she did.

That night she told Kern she would be working overtime for the next three weeks. 'Just while Miss Gould's away. You don't mind, do you?'

'I don't mind. This is good.' She had just dished up a new recipe. She took her seat, and a forkful of the mixture on her plate and it was tasty.

'So long as you're happy,' he said, and she remembered her father saying that when she'd told him she was taking a secretarial course and helping in the playschool. Do what you like so long as you don't

bother us, her parents had meant; and fear stabbed her that Kern might be starting to feel the same way.

She began to chatter. 'It isn't so dull, you know, working in that office, and Roy's very nice.'

'He's a nice bloke,' Kern agreed.

'He thinks you're ruthless,' she said.

'Do you discuss me often?' He didn't sound annoyed. How could he when you only had to look at him to know it was a simple statement of fact? He didn't sound annoyed, but neither did he sound particularly interested.

'We were talking about your work,' she explained. 'Roy thinks you have to be ruthless these days if you want to get to the top and stay there.'

Kern grinned, 'That's why he's stuck with property conveying, because he's such a nice bloke he couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag. Are you getting fond of him?'

'What a question!' He was teasing her, and she pretended to be shocked, smiling at him. She didn't need to answer. Any feeling she had for any other man could never compare or compete with her love for Kern.

But suppose she had said 'Yes,' would it have torn him apart, as it would her if he told her he wanted another woman? She changed the subject so abruptly that Kern must have noticed, but he let her change it and they talked of other things.

She was fond of Roy. Working closely with him she still went on liking him, but he could never make her pulses race and it never

occurred to her that he might be seeing himself as more than business colleague and friend.

Roy Wesk was a listener, a born sympathiser, and up to a point women liked that. Unluckily for Roy the brighter girls tired of him because he had no sense of humour, but as Philippa had no intimate interest in him it didn't bother her.

Sometimes she wondered if he could have told her things she didn't want to hear. When Kern's name was mentioned he always looked thoughtful, giving the impression that discretion was making him choose his words carefully.

Once, when Kern had to go up to London on business, staying overnight, Roy asked Philippa to go to the theatre with him. There were no strings to the invitation, and she accepted as naturally as though he had been a girl friend, glad to escape from her own company and an evening spent wondering if Kern was seeing Liliás.

Kern phoned her that night, and she told him about the show. She was alone by then, and he told her that the business talks had gone well and he was missing her, which sent her happy to bed. Later she wondered if he could have phoned to stop her ringing the number he had left her when she'd asked for a number—the home of his publisher and his wife—because he was somewhere else.

Next morning she mentioned to Roy that Kern had phoned, and it was Roy's, 'I suppose that saved you calling him,' that triggered her suspicions.

But she looked straight at Roy when she said, 'Yes, of course,' giving no sign of her thoughts.

While she was working as Roy's secretary she usually had lunch with him, because that way she could stay in the office when it was more convenient, or get a snack at a nearby cafe at a time that suited them.

Kern said he could easily make a sandwich for himself or get Mrs. Harris to leave him one, and Philippa felt that he preferred to be able to carry on working undisturbed.

The three weeks she was working full time she hadn't managed to get over to her old home to see her parents. She had phoned each week, speaking twice to her father and assuring him she was fine. The third time they were both out. They never phoned her, but she and Kern were supposed to be going to one of their parties on the Saturday night that Kern's play, in which Fleur was playing a part, was transmitted.

Philippa was looking forward to that with mixed emotions. She would rather have watched the play quietly with Kern, on their own, at home. Of course she wanted to see her parents, but she was afraid that Fleur's searching eye would spot the tiny rift. She must have heard that Lilius Storr was back in Kern's orbit, and she would certainly cross-examine Philippa on Kern's reactions to that. But if Philippa confided her vague worries Fleur would be bitterly triumphant at being proved right, and only make things worse because Philippa was still trying to tell herself that it was all in her own mind.

She worked that Saturday morning, but left earlier than she had expected when someone phoned to cancel an appointment at the last moment and Roy told her, 'You might as well go home, there's nothing else to do.'

'Thanks.' She could have a lazy afternoon in preparation for the party. 'Don't forget to watch the play tonight,' she reminded him.

All their friends knew that the play was on. 'I'll be watching,' Roy promised. 'Your mother and your husband, quite a family affair,' and she laughed.

'Oh yes, I've got some very smart folk around me.'

'You're smart yourself,' he assured her. 'I appreciate you stepping into the breach these last three weeks. This is the first time I've had reservations about Miss Gould's return. In fact I wanted to have a quiet word with you about that.'

He sounded so confidential that Philippa feared he was going to put forward some scheme for ousting Miss Gould and she said firmly, 'I couldn't pinch Miss Gould's job.'

'Of course not.' But he seemed regretful. 'But she is due to retire before long, and in the meantime if you'd like to continue full time we could find you plenty to do.'

She didn't really need her afternoons free these days. Kern was always busy, there wasn't much to do around the house and she quite enjoyed the work here. She asked, 'May I think about it over the weekend?'

'Certainly you may.' Roy was about to add something more, but changed his mind and, after a few seconds of looking rather like a floundering fish, closed his mouth.

Philippa walked home wondering if Kern would have anything to say about her taking on a full-time job, or if he'd tell her to please herself, that it was all one-to him so long as she was happy.

Of course she was happy. Or rather she would be if only she could rid herself of this obsessive suspicion that Liliass Storr was very much in touch with Kern again, these days. She had no concrete proof, just nagging doubts, and fears that she was no match for Liliass. And all she could do about them was keep repeating to herself, 'He married *me*,' as though it was an incantation to keep the pain away.

She turned into the cul-de-sac of the mews at the same moment that Liliass came out of the third door down. Philippa's home. And Kern's, of course. Kern was alone this morning, and Philippa hadn't been expected back for another hour.

As Liliass turned from the door and saw Philippa her eyes narrowed. Then she shrugged and came strolling towards Philippa, who was making a tremendous effort to look unconcerned because this proved nothing either. It didn't mean that Kern had known Liliass was coming or had wanted her to come. If Philippa could just say, sweetly and calmly, 'Hello, have you been calling on us?' that would give her an advantage.

But Liliass began to smile slowly and Philippa knew she was being laughed at, and anger rose in her so that by the time they were face to face she was blazing.

Liliass shrugged again, and Philippa asked, 'Am I back earlier than you expected?'

'What *do* you mean by that?' Liliass drawled. She was enjoying this, her face was alight with malice.

'As if you didn't know.'

'Oh dear, it's got claws!' She sounded as though a kitten had tried to scratch her, and Philippa snapped,

'And if you think I'll keep them sheathed while you try to take my husband away you've got the wrong girl!'

'And you've got the wrong man.' Suddenly the amusement had gone from Liliass Storr's voice, the eyes were narrowed again and the challenge was open.

'Do you know why he married you?' she said contemptuously. 'Because he thought he wanted a wife who'd accept second place to his work. I wouldn't. We had a row about it before I took off for the last time. After that he found himself a woman who'd ask for very little, but he's tiring of you already, and those little gold fetters called wedding rings aren't going to hold him much longer.'

Philippa had to keep her lips compressed because she couldn't trust herself to speak, but her mind was screaming.

'So get out of the way,' said Liliias.

Philippa was blocking the narrow pavement, but she couldn't move. If she had done she would have struck this woman who was telling her her marriage was doomed, and Liliias stepped on to the cobblestones and walked around her and said again, 'Just get out of the way.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

PHILIPPA didn't turn until Liliás had had plenty of time to get out of the mews. Fury and fear were churning in her, and she couldn't have said which emotion held sway. Her head felt as though it was bursting, and her stomach as though she had stepped into a lift that wasn't there. She wanted to hurry to Kern to repeat what Liliás had just said, and hear him laugh.

But supposing he didn't laugh? What if there was a grain of truth in it? Liliás hadn't said that he wanted out from his marriage right now. She had said he was tiring of Philippa, that marriage wouldn't hold him much longer, and if Philippa rushed in, incoherent and accusing, she might precipitate a situation of no return. No doubt that was what Liliás wanted, but Philippa had enough sense left to realise she was in no state for her own best interests.

She began to walk away from the house, and went on walking until she was calmer, although the hollow ache was still in her. As she retraced her steps she knew there was a very simple test ahead. If Kern told her Liliás had been here it meant there was nothing secretive about the visit. If he didn't, then all the shadowy doubts could have substance, and she couldn't pretend any longer that her marriage was safe and that Kern would never hurt her.

She let herself into the house. It was quiet and seemed empty, the door of the study shut. That was where Kern would be, and usually she made coffee before she knocked, so that she had another excuse for interrupting besides the fact that she wanted to see him as soon as she got home. That was why he had married her, Liliás had said, because she didn't interrupt, she knew her place.

But today she tapped on the door and Kern called, 'Yes?'

He looked busy, and Philippa wondered how much time he had spent with Liliás. 'I'm back,' she said brightly.

'Good.' The electric typewriter still hummed, he hadn't turned it off to talk to her, and he wasn't looking at her but at the words he had written. She hesitated, then asked,

'Anything interesting happen this morning?'

A small shake of the head meant no, it also meant— go away. 'No—visitors?' Her voice rose oddly and he turned on the swivel chair, his eyes suddenly keen.

'Why?'

She had given herself away as easily as that. Just by the tone of her voice she had betrayed that this was no casual query, and she admitted, 'I met Liliás.'

'And she told you she'd been here and you were waiting to see if I'd deny it?'

That summed it up. Philippa might have said, 'She also told me why you married me and that a wedding ring isn't going to hold you,' but if she did Kern could have said, 'That's right.'

'Something like that,' she said.

He almost smiled, but not his eyes. 'What kind of evidence are you wanting?' he asked softly. 'Is Roy Wesk advising you?' And she heard herself say,

'Do I need a lawyer?'

'When you do I'd look around for somebody else.'

He was angry because he thought she was trying to trap-him, like an over-possessive wife, but whether he admitted it or not Liliastorr was bent on wrecking this marriage, and Philippa was angry too. Angry and scared.

'Rgy's a good lawyer and a good friend,' she protested. 'And why did Liliastorr come here this morning? Because she knew you'd be alone?'

Kern had turned off the typewriter now, and pushed it back, away from him, and sat with clenched hands on the table. 'She came to see if she'd left a book here,' he said.

'A *book*?' She couldn't keep the derision out of her voice. 'When would she have been likely to have left a book?'

'Before I met you,' he said bluntly, 'when she was living here half the time.'

She should have known that, but she still looked shaken. It was hearing him say it that made her shrink. Liliastorr living here. Living with Kern. Using everything in this house, treating it as her home probably for far longer than it had been home for Philippa. So that was the key she had, could still have.

'Of course, how stupid of me.' Philippa spoke in a tight little voice, and Kern said wearily,

'I thought that was common knowledge.'

'I'm sure it was.' She wasn't passing moral judgments, her lips were compressed to stop them trembling. 'I just don't want to hear about it,' she said.

'That's as well. It could take a long time if you suddenly decide you're entitled to a run-down of my past ten years.'

The controlled brusqueness of his voice put as much distance between them as though he had shouted at her, but she stood her ground. 'Please don't bother,' she said.

'It wouldn't bother me,' he said quietly, 'but I can see it would bother you.'

'I—don't know you very well, do I?'

'No, love, you don't.' Then he grinned wryly. 'If you had done you'd never have married me.'

She didn't want the talking to be like this. Now he would say that the marriage was a mistake, and she had to stop him saying that. She said desperately, 'This party tonight, we could get out of it. You don't really want to go, don't you? We could watch the play here. I could say you're working, you're busy.'

'You go,' said Kern.

'On my own?' she wailed.

'From what I know of Philip and Fleur there'll be a houseful.' Kern had been to more parties at her parents' house than she had herself, but he was not going to this one. Even if she begged, and she wasn't begging. He could be meeting Liliás, and if she started to beg she might finish weeping.

'What do I tell them?' she asked.

He pulled the typewriter towards him and switched on. 'Like you said, I'm working, I'm busy.'

'You're working. All right.' As Liliás had said, work came first.

She shut the door after her, and she knew he wouldn't follow. She could hang around all afternoon and he wouldn't come out of the study. She could stay instead of going to the party, but if he went out this evening then she would know he was going to meet Liliias, and he'd admit it. He might bring Liliias back with him, she was as much at home here as Philippa was, and what could Philippa do then, except pack and go, or stay and rail against them both?

This had been their first quarrel. The marriage could be nearly over and they had never even quarrelled before. She knew that Kern could be irascible, but not with her. He had always been kind to her, too kind perhaps, too good to be true. Buying her expensive presents, like toys for a child. Or conscience- gifts, because already he was tiring of her.

It would surprise nobody. Her parents, his friends, had all been doubtful when he'd married Philippa. She had been the only one who believed that the marriage would endure. But she had only known him for four weeks, and although he was her husband now he had just told her she didn't know him very well. That if she did she wouldn't like him, she wouldn't want to be married to him ...

She went into the bedroom and thought—a stranger sleeps with me in that bed, talks to me, makes me laugh, brought me alive.

She sat at the dressing table and told the corn dolly, 'We've just had our first quarrel,' sounding like a child talking to a toy, or somebody whistling in the dark because she was scared to death at what was happening.

It had been a very quiet quarrel, but as threatening as the first falling rock that starts an avalanche, and suddenly Philippa was remembering that moment at Nun's Well when she had looked at Kern McCabe's hard face and imagined, briefly, that there was war between them, that he was a man who could destroy her.

She jumped up and began to pack at a feverish rate, putting her dress for tonight's party into a small case, and clothes for an overnight stay. Then she went back to the study. 'Sorry to interrupt you again,' she said, 'but if you're not coming I might as well go now and have a few extra hours over there. There doesn't seem to be anything I can do here. And I'll stay overnight, I'll see you tomorrow.'

She had a forlorn hope that Kern would protest. When he got up she held her breath, longing for him to say, 'I'll come,' or even, 'Don't stay overnight,' but he just kissed her lightly, like a goodbye at a railway station, and said, 'Sorry about this, but I should stick at it.'

It was an apology. It meant she could go believing that he really had to work, and she almost did believe it because she wanted to so badly.

'Where's Kern?' was almost the first thing everyone asked Philippa.

As she walked into her old home her mother came into the hall and hurried to meet her with outstretched arms. 'Philippa darling, how lovely to see you!' The same effusive greeting she would give to all her guests, with the theatrical kiss and embrace. And then, 'Where's Kern?'

'He couldn't make it,' said Philippa. 'He asked me to apologise for him, but he's finishing this book and he's practically chained himself to the typewriter.'

'Oh!' Fleur's smile vanished and Philippa said quickly,

'You look well, you look marvellous.'

Fleur knew that. She eyed Philippa's case. 'Are you staying, darling?'

'Just overnight. That's all right, isn't it?'

'Of course, this is your home, but do you think--'

She bit her lip, looked around, and put a hand on Philippa's arm, steering her out of the hall into the small drawing room. Then she took up the unfinished sentence again. 'But do you think it's wise leaving Kern on his own? Liliass Storr's around again, you know.'

'I had noticed,' said Philippa drily.

'And people are saying--' Philippa was sure that Fleur knew all the gossip, but she didn't want to hear it. Her eyes, as long-lashed and the same colour as Fleur's own famous eyes, were very steady.

'I can hardly stick by him twenty-four hours a day,' she said quietly. 'He wouldn't like that.'

'You poor child,' said Fleur tremulously. 'You poor, poor darling, but we did warn you, didn't we? We knew this would happen. When we first heard you were going around with Kern I said to Philip that it was like putting you in a cage and expecting you to tame a tiger.'

Liliass had said Philippa had hitched her wagon to a whirlwind ... to tame a tiger, to hold a whirlwind. They sounded like something out of mythology, like Hercules' labours; and they meant, quite simply, that nobody thought she had a hope in life of holding Kern.

Pride stiffened her spine and she laughed, 'Did you really? How melodramatic! But all that's happened is that Kern has a book to finish and he can't come to the party.'

Fleur was silenced. If Philippa wasn't admitting that Liliass was a danger, either she was still besotted blind about Kern, or she was developing a sophisticated streak. She didn't look dewy-eyed, she looked cool and poised and really very pretty.

It seemed there might be compensations in this disastrous marriage, because Philippa's appearance had improved almost out of recognition since she'd met Kern; and although Fleur was not over-thrilled by a daughter attractive enough to be competitive it was better than a daughter who was a drag. 'What dress are you wearing for the party?' she asked.

At the party Philippa countered all questions about Kern in the same way. She smiled and told them how hard he was working, and wearing the turquoise chiffon that had been part of her trousseau she got plenty of flattering attention.

Of course Kern's absence was noted, but Philippa seemed to be having a good time. She was discovering that she had inherited something else from Fleur besides amber eyes, the makings of an actress. Nobody could guess that her heart was aching as she smiled and flirted, and for the first time played the hostess alongside her mother with skill and charm.

Edmund Buff-Harrington watched her goggle-eyed. That would have amused Kern. Given half a chance this time Edmund would have been delighted to walk Philippa around the gardens, although it was a dark and frosty night, and at last he burst out, 'I can't get over it! I wouldn't have known you. You look absolutely stunning.'

'Thank you.' She didn't laugh at him because it was a sincere compliment, but her eyes danced as she told him gravely, 'I've grown up at last. I was a very late developer.'

The televising of the play, covering ninety minutes, was the highlight of the evening. The TV set was in the small drawing room. The idea was that people should wander in and watch for a while, then rejoin the main body of the party, spilling into most of the rooms on the ground floor.

Philippa settled herself into a corner because she was far more interested in the play than the party, and she noticed that quite a few of the others got hooked and sat from beginning to end. Fleur was effective in the role she was best at, a beautiful and brittle woman, and when *The End* floated up on the screen everyone crowded around her and she was in her element.

Philippa was congratulated on Kern's behalf, and although it didn't mean much—guests were usually complimentary to your face—she knew herself that they had just seen a disturbingly powerful piece of work. She agreed with the man who wasn't talking to her, and hadn't noticed her near, who said in awestruck tones to another man, 'My God, but McCabe can write!'

She had read the script, and now she wanted to tell Kern how splendid it had been in living action; and she wanted to tell him about Edmund—because that would make him laugh and remember the last time when the three of them were out under the moon and it had been the beginning of everything.

She went upstairs to phone, well out of hearing, using the extension in her mother's room, and sat on the bed and listened to the ringing. It went on long enough for Kern to come out of the study, out of the bathroom. Long enough for him to hear it wherever he was in the house. But he didn't answer, and Philippa sat there a long time before she hung up.

He wasn't working, or he would have picked up the phone to silence the incessant ringing. He hadn't even stayed to watch his own play. He was out, and after this morning the odds were that he was somewhere with Liliás.

She had to go down to the party again, so she started her smile before she came out of the bedroom, coming downstairs with lips curved, wearing gaiety like a mask.

The mask almost slipped when a thin dark dapper man said, 'Pity Kern couldn't make it. You don't get around together so much these days, do you?'

'I wouldn't say that,' shrugged Philippa.

'Let's see,' he said, 'how long have you been married?'

She wanted to tell him to shut up, but he was a guest here whoever he was, and he was probably a little drunk. He had a large glass of Scotch and he looked as though it was nearer his fourth than his first. 'Nearly six whole months,' she said lightly.

'And you recommend whirlwind marriages? Or do you think couples should take longer than four weeks to get to know each other before they marry?'

'If I'm being asked for advice I have to admit that they probably should,' she joked.

The thin man grinned at her. 'Nice party, real pity Kern couldn't make it,' he said. When Philippa read the piece in the paper she couldn't imagine how she had been stupid enough not to realise she was talking to a newspaperman. Journalists were often at her parents' parties, and those questions had been loaded.

It was Wednesday morning. She was drinking coffee and wondering whether she wanted any more toast before she set off for work. Kern, still in a bathrobe, had been glancing through the papers, with a coffee cup at his elbow, and he handed the paper across the table to her. 'We're the lead,' he said.

The biggest headline on the gossip page asked 'Is the McCabe Marriage On The Rocks?' and horrified, she read, 'An old saying could be proving itself in the Kern McCabe-Philippa Sorrel romance. The one about marrying in haste. The couple wed within four weeks

of meeting, and sadly, after only six months, there appears to be a rift. Philippa was alone on Saturday night at a party to celebrate the TV play, written by Kern and starring her mother Fleur Sorrel. She was looking delightful, with her flashing smile and her huge amber eyes, but she advised impetuous lovers to take longer before committing themselves to matrimony. Philippa, it seems, has regrets.'

She couldn't believe it. She began to say, 'I never said that,' then she remembered what she had said and when, and shook her head, still bewildered. 'I didn't realise he was a reporter. I thought he was just tactless and a bit drunk.'

'Probably all three,' said Kern.

'How *awful!*' She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. 'It sounds dreadful, and I didn't mean it like that, of course I don't have regrets.'

Since she came back on Sunday everything had gone very calmly here. She had told Kern she'd tried to phone him, and he had said he was out, without explaining where. There was a restraint, and Philippa wasn't sorry she was still working full time. Kern had raised no objections to that. He was working too, late and hard. Last night she didn't know what time he had come to bed. She had tried to stay awake, but she had fallen asleep at last, and when she woke it was morning.

Now she read the paragraph again and said, 'I'm sorry.'

'Why?' He was cynically amused, as though this was a bad joke. 'You're probably right, we should have waited longer.'

But if they had waited they wouldn't have married. Liliass would have come back. She was back now, and Kern was wishing he hadn't married Philippa.

She gripped her hands together, below table level, out of sight, and said in a voice that sounded odd because of the tightness in her throat, 'I think I wanted to marry you as soon as I met you.'

Kern looked at her steadily. 'Don't you know why?'

'What?'

'Do you know why you wanted me?' Her lips parted, she was trying to speak when he went on, 'Because you were looking for a father figure to take you to the circus.'

'What?'

'You wanted emotional security and you felt safe in my pocket.'

She was not safe now. The ground was moving beneath her. Her world had never been in such peril, and she said huskily,

'That is a savage thing to say.'

'But true.'

'It is not true!' No one had been so kind to her as Kern, until now. Perhaps she had been starved of kindness, but she loved him, and she said raggedly, 'You're my husband, not my father. You're the man I love.'

'I'm the only man you've had.'

She sat very still at that. Then she said, 'True.' Before Kern her only sexual experience had been hand- holding and an occasional clumsy kiss. He had had the skill to arouse every dormant longing, his lovemaking had taken her into a new dimension of singing senses, and now he was saying that might be all it was. A physical reaction, as satisfying for her with another man as it had almost certainly been

for him with other women. She said bitterly, 'Wasn't I lucky to get an expert first time?'

'Were you?'

'I don't honestly know.' She looked at her watch. 'I'm due at work. I'm sure everybody will have read this. It should make Lili's day.'

'It won't exactly put a damper on Roy Wesk's,' said Kern cynically.

Of course he was making cracks about Roy to ease his conscience, and Roy said he had been very grieved to read it. 'My fault, I'm afraid,' said Philippa. 'I didn't realise I was nattering to a reporter, and you know how they put words into your mouth.'

Roy said indeed he did, as though he was being constantly misreported. Then he said that Philippa always had a friend in him, 'A shoulder to cry on.' He smiled sadly at her with that offer, and she grimaced.

'Now what would I be crying about?' Roy patted her hand, he did a lot of hand patting. 'Just remember,' he said.

Of course everyone had seen the story, although few of them mentioned it. Her mother did, phoning up that evening and asking why she had given Willy a quote like that. 'Because I didn't know what Willy's line was,' said Philippa. 'I thought I was chatting up a guest.'

'But everyone knows Willy,' Fleur protested. 'All the same, darling, it might not be a bad idea if you did the walking out. Easier on the pride than being the abandoned wife.' She sounded as though she was discussing a play and which role offered more scope, and Philippa felt tired and ill.

'You think so?' she said. 'Goodbye now, there's someone at the door.' There was no one at the door. Philippa had just come home, the phone had started ringing as she passed it; she didn't even know if Kern was here.

She could be quite alone again, the way she was before she met Kern. She had been a deprived child, un-cherished until Kern rode along, the knight on the white charger, swinging her up behind him to gallop away on the great adventure.

Perhaps that was how she had seen him, representing emotional security for the first time in her life, just as he had said, and perhaps that was what she had wanted. And perhaps it was over now.

But she was not the girl she had been. She could survive, she could work. She counted now, and other men desired her.

The study door opened and Kern came out, and she was riven with longing for his arms around her, the pressure of his lips, the wonder of being close to him. 'You're the man I love,' she had told him this morning, and he had answered, 'I'm the only man you've had,' so perhaps it was just a need, a physical hunger. But whatever it was it didn't hit him when he saw her. He looked calm enough.

'Hello,' he said. 'Who was it?'

'The phone? My mother. She saw the piece in the paper and she suggests that I walk out on you before you walk out on me.' She said that to shake his self-control and he grinned faintly.

'That's nice. What did you say?'

'I made no promises.'

He said, 'That could be the answer.'

Once Philippa had thought they had all the answers, now nothing was sure any more and she could only take life day by day. Winter had come quickly with a spell of bitter weather, and it seemed to Philippa that she skated on thin ice, literally and metaphorically.

There was certainly a chill in her marriage. No real rows, but an edginess and a feeling of frustration, while she watched and waited, and knew from Roy Wesk, and practically everyone else, that they all thought her days with Kern were numbered.

She was cool and bright, acting so well that she sometimes felt she should have been nominated for an Oscar. Even when Liliias was around. Particularly when Liliias was around. It was still Philippa Kern came home to at nights, but the nights had changed. She was tense and troubled now instead of relaxed and ardent. Once when he touched her she stiffened and he asked, 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.' Except that if he was tiring of her this was only another kind of charity. He never said he loved her now. 'I—I've got a headache,' she said.

She heard him laugh in the darkness. 'That's original. Would you like me to move into the spare room?'

Stupidly she said, 'We don't have a spare room.'

'You don't miss much,' he said. 'Goodnight.' He turned and slept, and Philippa lay very still, breathing regularly so that it sounded as though she was sleeping too, with the tears sliding down her face.

There was no lovemaking after that. There was a kindly tolerance from Kern that was worse than antagonism, because it was reminiscent of her parents' attitude—don't bother us and we won't bother you. The gulf was wide and widening, and when the first snow- flaks fell she thought—we won't see the spring together. She hurried to the office these mornings because everything there was

predictable routine, and when she was immersed in work she could fool herself she had forgotten her worries.

But now unhappiness was deep inside her, just as a few short months ago happiness had been the core of her being. Now, when Roy pursed his lips and looked particularly mournful, or other friends of Kern and Liliás trotted out snide remarks, she knew it was only a matter of time before the showdown was forced on her. And then the parting, the fork in the road, with Kern going one way and herself left to wander down the other, whether she wanted to or not.

She usually had lunch with Roy these days and they were sitting at the usual table in the usual restaurant when Kern walked in. He knew where she lunched, she had told him, and he didn't mind, but when she saw him she gave a little gasp of surprise and Roy automatically patted her hand, covering it with his and murmuring, 'It's all right, he's on his own.'

He'd expected Liliás to be with Kern, but Kern was looking for Philippa and he came over to their table. 'I thought I'd find you here.' He drew up a chair, nodded affably at Roy, then turned to Philippa. 'I'm going down to Cornwall for a couple of weeks or so. It's this series I've let myself in for.'

He'd agreed to do a series for one of the colour supplements, on men who'd stood alone, outsiders. He'd said something yesterday about getting down to the research for that now the book was finished, and this was typical enough. Kern didn't waste time. He might just as easily have been off to the other side of the world. 'Right now?' said Philippa.

'Yes. I've left you the address and the number of the hotel.' There was no suggestion that Philippa might go with him. She was working full-time, but Roy would have let her have a few days off if Kern had

asked for them. Once she could have said, 'Put me in your pocket,' but never again. She said brightly,

'Don't worry about me, I'll keep the home fires burning.'

'Yes.' Kern looked down at Roy's hand on the table, protectively covering Philippa's, and one eyebrow raised as he said, 'I can see I'm leaving you in good hands.'

Roy jumped, but Philippa smiled steadily. 'I'm sure the research will be invaluable,' she said.

When Kern had gone Roy began to work himself into indignation. 'This is all the notice he gives you! He just walks in and tells you--'

'You know Kern,' she said lightly. 'He doesn't waste time. That's how he gets so much work done. Do you think I could have another cup of coffee?'

Kern didn't phone, and her pride wouldn't let her call him. She tried to avoid mutual friends. She didn't want them asking questions, and she didn't want them giving her advice, but she couldn't dodge Roy Wesk, and at the end of the first week without Kern he gave her a lift home. It was snowing slightly, leaden dark just after midday, and she had almost decided to go home for the weekend. Both her parents were away, but if she stayed here she was almost sure she would find Roy underfoot.

'Mind if I come in for a few minutes?' he said, as he drew up in the mews, and she shrugged.

'All right, I'll give you a cup of coffee, but I've got packing to do—I'm going home for the weekend.'

If home was where the heart is, the house of her childhood qualified as well as this. But as soon as he stepped inside Roy demanded, 'What are you going to do?'

'What about?'

'You haven't heard from Kern, have you ?'

'No, but--'

'You know he's left you.' No one had put it that bluntly before, and Philippa couldn't quite believe that Kern would skulk away, excusing himself with the story of research. She said, 'I don't think so.'

'I'm not saying he won't come back here,' Roy's earnest face was pink with strain, 'but I'm sick of him making a fool of you. He went back to Liliass weeks ago. She's with him now, her sister had a card from her yesterday. Legally he may be your husband, but everyone knows he's still her lover.'

She wished she had the strength to say very loudly, 'You are lying,' but of course it was true, and she had no strength at all. There was a chair near and she sat down quickly or she would have slithered to the ground because her legs wouldn't support her, and her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

'People do have poisonous minds,' she said. 'You too, Roy.'

His face flushed even pinker. 'I'm sorry, but you can't go on refusing to accept the facts.'

She bit her lip to stop hysteria rising, and wondered if Kern would have let her stay if the skeletons hadn't come tumbling out of the cupboard, and thought he would, and wondered where she could find the courage to leave.

Roy was patting her shoulder now and telling her, 'If only you could see that it's all for the best, you could never be his kind of girl. You're my kind of girl.' She looked blankly at him and he looked imploringly at her. 'You know I love you, don't you?'

She knew that it didn't matter if he loved or hated her, but the fact that she had been hurt so terribly was no reason for hurting poor Roy, and she managed to say, 'Don't, please, not now.'

'I'm sorry.' He looked as though he could have wept for her. 'But you know that things can't go on like this. Why don't you come to my home?' His father was the senior partner of the firm, and she wondered how Roy's ultra-respectable parents would greet Kern McCabe's wife. Very unwillingly, she thought, and Roy's home was the last place she saw as sanctuary.

'I must think.' She pressed fingertips to her throbbing temples. She had known this was coming, she had known that some time it would have to be faced, and really it was simple enough. All she had to do was stop loving Kern, as he had stopped loving her, and then her pride would save her. She had to get away alone somewhere where no one would talk about Kern, or tell her what she should be doing. 'I must go away,' she said.

'Of course, you come--' She wasn't talking to Roy, she was talking to herself. She made a silencing gesture and it worked. He shut up and stood watching her, listening.

'I have to be alone for a while,' she said to herself. If she went to friends they would talk. A hotel somewhere, a long way from the hotel where Kern was with Lilius? Or the cottage on the mountain? She could have a week at the cottage, and in this weather Bron and Hew wouldn't bother her. She'd look in on them, tell them Kern was away and she'd brought some work to do. She could really be on her

own there. If she went to pieces nobody would see her until she had got herself together again.

She walked into the bedroom and took out a case and began to pack warm clothes. Roy followed her in, but the mumble of his voice hardly impinged on her consciousness until the packing was almost done, and then she had to make an effort to get back on his wavelength.

'Where are you *going*?' he was asking, as though he had been asking for some time, and he probably had.

Philippa told him, 'To a cottage in Wales. It's empty and I can be alone there. I'm sorry about the office; this is very short notice and I hope it won't be too inconvenient.' The polite banalities fell from her lips and Roy rushed to reassure her they could manage, and that he was deeply sorry he was the one who had made her face the facts. And that she knew her job was waiting, and he was waiting.

Kern will probably be relieved to hear that, she thought wildly, he has a conscience about me. He'll be glad that somebody else is offering me security. She said, 'You're very kind.' And kindness is a thing I am beginning to hate. 'But please don't worry,' she said, 'you told me nothing I didn't know.'

She closed the door on him and his pity. Of course he didn't love her, she was not in the least his kind of girl, but like Edmund and most of the men she met these days he found her attractive. She was attractive, and the world was full of susceptible men, and once she had Kern out of her system she might meet somebody else whose lightest touch made her heart miss a beat, whom she wanted desperately.

The trouble was that Kern was overwhelming. So long as he was near, or even if there were people around saying his name, she was

trapped by the sheer magnetism of him. She had to break free, and to do that she had to get away.

The cottage had memories, of course, but they were memories that would harden her resolve. He was with Liliias now, so the memories had meant very little to him, and if Philippa had any spirit at all a few days and nights in the cottage should make her impervious to anything else Kern could do. Once she had had time to build up her defences he wouldn't be able to hurt her.

They had left the kitchen cupboard full of tins, and she emptied the pantry of the mews house and packed all that in the boot of the car. Mrs. Harris would re-stock before Kern returned. Even if she didn't he'd soon get himself a meal.

Philippa set off by first light next morning; she had to have daylight for the trek from where she could leave the car, and the skies were dark and threatening. Snow" was falling in leisurely fashion, little bitter flakes, and it was plain there was more to come.

The drive down was on iced roads, and when she knocked on the door of the farm she had quite a tussle with Bron and Hew, who were very reluctant indeed to let her go up to the cottage. 'You're going to get snowed in,' Bron warned her. 'Look at it!' The gun-metal sky and the frozen landscape. 'It's going to be a heavy fall.'

'That's all right,' Philippa insisted. 'There's fuel up there, isn't there? and I've got lots of food. I don't mind.'

She wanted to be completely isolated, somewhere she could cry all her tears and no one would see her. At the moment she trusted no one in this world, she was turning her face against the whole human race, and when Hew said, 'We'd better come up with you and see how things are,' she tried to protest.

She didn't want them marooned with her, but she felt they were in two minds about physically restraining her, and while she was protesting they were getting into thick coats and heavy boots. They followed her car in their Land Rover, and then helped her carry the boxes of food and her case up to the cottage.

They opened their eyes wide when Philippa produced her golden key, and babbled, 'Kern had this made for me. I don't know whether it works or whether the gilting's gunged it up, but--'

The golden key did work and Hew slipped his key back into his pocket, and they carried the boxes in. They were very good friends, to whom Philippa was very grateful, the last thing they must have wanted to do on this bitterly cold Sunday was climb a mountain carrying heavy boxes of provisions. While she was offering, 'Can I get you a cup of tea?' Hew had Bron's arm and was telling her,

'We'll be getting back while the light holds.'

'Thank you,' Philippa called after them. 'Thank you!'

Huddled in the doorway, she watched the dark figures on the white slopes. The end of the track where the cars stood was in a dip, hidden from the cottage, and when Bron and Hew vanished from her sight she had to go inside. There was no further excuse, and she was numb with cold in the open doorway.

Last time the fog had dimmed the light coming in through the windows, now it was snowclouds, heavy and low-lying, so that although Hew had opened the shutters the room was almost in darkness.

Last time Kern had carried her in. 'It's always cold in here,' he'd said, 'but it warms up quickly. I'll light the fire and the lamps. Stay right where you are.' This time, unless she wanted to freeze to death, she

had better move and quickly. She had a torch in her handbag and matches, and she lit one of the paraffin lamps and a couple of candles.

The kindling of the fire was damp so that she had to dismantle the whole thing and start again, twisting firelighters from paper in her boxes of provisions, feeding in twigs, then sticks, and finally a log and a shovelful of coal.

Then she went outside to the stream, that was frozen at the edges and so icy cold that filling the bucket and pouring the water down the container was agony, turning her fingers blue and swollen. If the snow came thick at least she would be able to scoop up water outside her door. When she got back she sat as close to the fire as she could, holding her hands to the blaze and giving herself excruciating pins and needles for being in such a hurry to get warm.

The memories were here, of course, but it was all so different this time. A changed landscape outside from the hot summer days, and inside the cottage real biting cold-on everything. There was a great deal to do. If she wanted a bed for the night it had to be aired. The lined chest upstairs was supposed to protect the bedclothes from damp, but they were damp, and she brought them down and draped them around the fire. The mattress too. They had put that back in its plastic covering when they'd left, and she wouldn't remember how they had carried it up the mountain, laughing so much that the cumbersome load was almost unmanageable. Now she dragged it off the bed and slid it down the narrow stairs, and upended it where it should get some of the heat from the fire.

When there was less to do she would get around to thinking about her future. She knew that tonight, alone in that bed, grief was going to come down on her like a bereavement, and she was going to weep for everything that had been living and lovely, and was now as cold and dead as the snow.

Her only consolation was that no one would know. She was safe between these walls, and she was glad to see the snow falling faster, so that when she went out to fasten the shutters for the night a thick white carpet lay over everything.

She was tired, it had been an exhausting day, and as soon as the bedding seemed aired she got it back upstairs and made up the bed, leaving a lamp burning on the chest to take some of the bitter chill out of the air. If she *could* sleep through the first night the ones that followed wouldn't be so bad.

Then she sat down to her first meal for over twelve hours, soup and crackers, and turned on the small transistor she had brought along, listening to an erudite gentleman talking about Etruscan art because she daren't listen to music.

The knocking on the door was so loud that the shock of it brought her to her feet so suddenly she sent her chair sprawling. She was terrified for a moment. It was the last thing she had expected, as eerie and impossible as being on a raft in the middle of the sea and hearing someone knocking underneath.

Then she thought—Hew! Bron's persuaded him to come and fetch me, or come and make sure I've got a fire going and I'm not frozen stiff. Oh dear, what a dreadful nuisance I'm being to them.

She turned the golden key and peered out, and Kern, covered in snow, glared in, and Philippa felt the blood leaving her face until it seemed that even her lips must be white. 'Oh no!' she moaned, 'not you!'

It wasn't fair. Whatever had brought him here shouldn't have happened. This was cruel, whether it was chance or not.

He shouldered her aside and strode in, shaking himself like a great dog. There was snow in his hair and eyebrows and his skin was wet. He wiped a hand across his face and he wasn't surprised to find her

there. When he looked at her there was no surprise in his expression, still less was there any pleasure at seeing her. The impression she got, before he had said a word, was of black thunderous anger.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HEW must have been in touch with Kern and told him that Philippa was here, and Kern still felt responsible for her, the way you would for a pet or a child. He'd come to take her back to where he would know she was safe, and he was furious that she had put him to this trouble. In the name of heaven why couldn't people leave alone? She had needed so desperately to keep away from Kern, and she was filled with inarticulate resentment against everyone and everything that had brought him tramping into her retreat.

'Why did you follow me?' came jerkily in a cry of despair and he said,

'Don't kid yourself. I didn't know you were here until Hew just told me.'

He took off his trench coat, from which the snow was slithering on to the flagstones, and hung it on a hook behind the kitchen door. She had forgotten how big he was. That was crazy, perhaps she had forgotten how small the cottage was. He filled doorways.

But if no one had told him she was here why had he come, only hours after she'd arrived? Her eyes ached with unshed tears because now she dared not weep. 'You just *came*'?' she gasped. 'Why?'

'Why not?' he said laconically. 'I write here. That's why I bought the place.'

He had come to work, expecting complete privacy and finding Philippa; and if there had been no snow outside she almost believed that he would have thrown her out and locked the door on her. If she had ever imagined for one moment that any living soul was more important to him than his work this proved otherwise. She turned off the radio and said bitterly, 'It's an ideal place for work, and the occasional honey-moon.'

He had his back to her. He had gone to the fire, and his voice was flat and hard. 'That was a piece of midsummer madness if you like.'

'Wasn't it just?' That was the only way to describe it. That was what Lilius must have been saying for weeks—'You must have been mad to marry Philippa.'

The stinging unshed tears hurt, and while his back was turned she tried to blink them away and asked, 'So why did you bother climbing all up here, when Bron and Hew told you the cottage was occupied and you could have had the mews house all to yourself?'

'So can you,' he said. She was never going back there. When she left here that would be the end of the life she had shared with Kern. She shrugged as he turned and drawled,

'Well, I can't get out tonight no matter how much you'd prefer to be on your own.' He was scowling as though he'd almost thought she might, and the sheer arrogance of that sparked her spirit so that she snapped, 'Why shouldn't you go? It's half my cottage, isn't it? You go.'

'I'm damned if I will!' He came towards her and she thought—oh God, he's going to hit me. She felt violence in the air and tensed against it, but Kern walked past her, up the stairs, leaving wet footsteps, and Philippa holding her breath.

She had always known that Kern was dangerous. He had an iron self-control, but she had never made him this angry before. He was furious with her now, and she was seeing the darker side of his character with a vengeance. She should be glad of that. She was falling out of love as completely and as suddenly as she had fallen in love, and she couldn't say she hadn't been warned. 'Like putting you in a cage and expecting you to tame a tiger,' her mother had said. Tigers were wonderful—until they turned on you.

She could hear him moving around upstairs. He had clothes in the cupboard and he was probably changing, although they could well be as damp as the clothes he had come through the snow in. If he had any sense he would bring them down and air them, but he wouldn't and he wouldn't catch cold. He was tough as old boots. Philippa had thought that the first time she saw him, looking down into the hall and seeing the flash of red hair and mistaking him for Paddy Riley's father.

She mustn't remember that. She must remember Liliás. Tomorrow she would go, and tonight she would just keep as far away from Kern as she could and say nothing. She'd go to bed and try to sleep.

Go to bed... But there was only one bed, and her head was aching and she was tired. She felt as she had when Roy told her that Liliás was with Kern, too weak to stand, drained of life; and she righted the chair she had knocked over and sat down again at the table. There was still a little soup in the bowl and she picked up her spoon, carefully because her hand was shaking, and swallowed a mouthful of the warm liquid that suddenly had no taste at all.

She must be cool, she couldn't stand any more arguing and she would be a fool to antagonise Kern any further. When he came down she would say, 'Have some soup.' As she heard the old stairs creaking she ran her tongue over her lips and tried to say, 'Have some soup,' but it came out, 'How's Liliás?'

He picked up the other chair and carried it nearer the fire, and sat down with long legs stretched so that Philippa hoped he wasn't going to answer—she really hadn't meant to say that—but after a moment or two he said, 'Very well. I'll tell her you asked after her.'

'She sent her sister a card.'

'Women seem to have a mania for sending cards.' Philippa remembered her honeymoon and the cards she hadn't sent, and

wondered if he was jeering at that, and thought—it would be easy to hate you.

She finished her dregs of soup, the spoon clattering in the basin, then asked, 'Did the research go well?

What is this series about?' She answered herself, 'Men who stood alone, isn't it? Well, you're certainly not getting the breaks that way,' with a mocking laugh, 'Lilias while you're doing the research and me when you want to get down to the writing.'

Kern turned his head, just his head, and looked at her with eyes like flint.

'What are you doing here?' he asked. She had told Hew and Bron that she had brought some work— they had probably thought it was for Kern, or she was writing or studying—but to Kern that must have sounded unlikely. He wasn't getting the simple truth —I came to get away from everybody, and you most of all; although he'd guess that was what she meant when she snapped,

'I needed a change of air, and I have some thinking to do.'

'Don't let me disturb you.' He disturbed her so that she couldn't breathe normally, let alone think straight. This little room that had seemed such a haven an hour ago felt like a prison cell now.

'And don't let me disturb you,' she said. 'One or the other of us had better get out of here tomorrow.' She made her lips smile, 'How about tossing for it?' Her handbag was on the table and she reached for it, and took a tenpence piece from her purse. 'Heads or tails?' He didn't answer. 'All right,' she said, 'I'll take heads.' She flipped and it came down tails. 'You win, I go.'

She had meant to go in any case, she only wished the night was over and it was morning. She would walk down to the little red car Kern

had bought her, and that -she would return some time along with all the other presents she couldn't bear to keep. And drive away, and stay away until she had her plan of action worked out, another job and another home. Or perhaps Ijack to her mother and father for a while. That house was big enough to hide in, and after they'd said, 'We told you so,' they wouldn't bother her.

'Now shall we toss and see who gets the bed and who sleeps down here?' she said. Kern's mouth was as hard as his eyes, and she shrank back a little because part of her was afraid of him and what he might do.

She tossed the coin again, and again it came down tails. 'Not my day,' she said lunatically. 'And I've just finished airing it. Can I have the mattress? We tossed for the bed, not the bedding, didn't we?'

She was nattering from nervousness and he said, suddenly and harshly, 'I'm in no mood for playing games. I'm sleeping where I always sleep and I don't give a damn what you do. But you needn't worry, if I get near you it will be by accident.'

He got up and went into the kitchen, opening a cupboard, taking out tins. 'We do have a spare bedroom here,' he said.

There was another tiny room upstairs, leading off the bedroom, a junkroom with a tin trunk full of old books in it, and that horsehair mattress they had dumped on the floor. Of course she couldn't sleep in there, nor with Kern, and he knew it. But there was nothing down here except the wooden chairs, not even a rug on the flagstones. The old mattress might be lumpy, but it would be better than nothing, if she covered it with coats and got some more bedclothes out.

She was getting no help, but she didn't expect any. She rolled the old mattress down the stairs and propped it up near the fire. She almost took the bedclothes off the bed, but he'd been up here and seen the

bed made and she would only be making things worse for herself by behaving childishly. She got more sheets and another blanket from the chest, and tried to air them as quickly as she could. If she was sleeping on flagstones she'd sleep fully dressed, so it shouldn't matter too much that the bedding wasn't aired.

Kern was getting himself a meal of corned beef and spaghetti. He took over the table as Philippa cleared her soup bowl from it, and neither of them spoke, and he was probably finding it easier to ignore her than she was to ignore him. She was a small girl and trying to merge into the background, but he strode around, filling the house.

When he'd eaten his meal he cleared the dishes and sat down, with a notebook and a larger writing pad. 'You did get *some* research done, then?' she said.

'Go to sleep,' he said curtly.

She hardly knew what she was saying or doing. The last two days had been traumatic. She had believed she would be alone here and could let go, but instead of that she was being subjected to a strain that was tearing her nerves to shreds. Sleep, he said! How could she sleep while he sat there?

But she made the bed and crawled under the sheets. At least it was warm down here, even the flagstones were warming up; but the flagstones were hard and so was the bed, and she lay rigid, her fatigue of mind and body failing to blur the pain. She turned on the radio, very softly, and immediately Kern snapped, 'Turn that bloody thing off!'

'Don't swear at me, and why should I? It can't be bothering you, it's too low, I can hardly hear it myself.'

'Then you must be deaf as well as stupid.'

'There's no need to descend to vulgar abuse.' That sounded prissy, and she almost expected him to roar with laughter, laughing at her this time, not with her, savagely mimicking her boarding-school accent. But instead he said very slowly,

'Don't push your luck. If abuse is all you get— vulgar or otherwise—you're a very lucky lady.'

There was menace in that she had to believe. 'So be quiet,' said Kern softly, 'and hope I'll forget you're here.'

He went on with his work, writing, using the notes, obviously having no difficulty in keeping her out of his - mind long as she made no noise. Philippa lay, on her hard mattress, a sheet shielding her face, wondering how she could ever have been blind enough not to see the bully, the thug, beneath the charm and the giving that was only in material things.

This was the real Kern McCabe, ruthless with anyone who got in his way. So long as Philippa adapted to his life style he was kind to her, but when she invaded his privacy, showing fight, then he had no scruples in treating her like an enemy.

It was ironic that the man who had healed the pain of her parents' rejection was also rejecting her, and this double blow should have reduced her to abject misery. But it hadn't. She would carry the scars as long as she lived. Never again would she be trusting, or truly happy, but she would survive. The six months with Kern had shown her that she was clever and attractive. Her heart might be breaking now, but she was not abject. She had too much spirit to cry or crawl in front of anyone. She was a fighter. Kern had taught her that too.

As she watched him a wave of anger swept over her. He might be a near-genius, but she had human rights. She would not be humiliated. If they had been anywhere else she would have walked out right now

and never seen him again. She would have smashed his concentration, but if she disturbed him here he seemed to be giving her warning that he'd beat her up or throw her out.

What he was quite capable of doing, she thought, was putting her in that empty room upstairs and bolting the door, and physically so far as he was concerned nothing would be easier. So she had to be quiet for now, and she could only think of the things she would like to do and say to him.

Most of all she longed to hit him over the head with something good and heavy, like the poker. That shocked her, for she hated violence, but the urge to hurl herself at the powerful figure, absorbed in his work, was almost irresistible. It might almost be worth being locked in an empty room, and freezing all night, to get in one lovely swinging blow. If he didn't hit her back, and she would be taking a fool's gamble on that.

She closed her eyes to shut him out, but then she imagined the room as it used to be the last time she was here, and opened her eyes again quickly. She had been lying here for well over an hour. It seemed longer, she had to strain to check the time on her wrist watch. One lamp didn't give a bright light, not even on the table. It was a mellow glow but not ideal for poring over papers, and if he had driven from Cornwall today his eyes must be very tired. She said impulsively, 'You'll blind yourself if you go on working by this light.'

'No, I won't,' he said. Now why *had* she said that? He'd take no notice of her advice, and why should she be concerned for him? Because she wanted him to go upstairs to bed, of course, to get out of this room so that she could relax and sleep. She wasn't concerned about him, only about herself. He was nothing to do with her, this boorish stranger without one redeeming feature, and it was just unlucky that he looked like someone who wasn't here any more.

Oh, Kern my love, where did you go? she cried in a desolation that felt as though she was outside in the snow and would never be warm again.

The stranger got up from the table, and Philippa sat up in her huddle of bedclothes as he went across to open the door. It didn't seem to be snowing now, but the freezing mountain air rushed in and she shivered for the few minutes he was outside closing the shutters. When he returned and shut the door he said, 'There's no one out there.'

She grimaced slightly. 'Not likely to be on a night like this.'

'Coming tomorrow, is he?'

'What are you talking about?' she asked blankly.

'Come off it.' He put some more coal on the fire while she followed his movements in a daze because what *yjas* he talking about? 'You were expecting someone else when you opened that door to me, weren't you? But unless he's a mountaineer he isn't going to make it tonight.'

She floundered, 'I thought it might be Hew, I--'

'Like hell,' Kern said cynically. 'You don't think I believed you came up here to be on your own, do you?'

'You did,' she pointed out.

'I came to work.'

'I came to think.'

'Well, think of this, it doesn't matter to me what you do, so you don't need to play the hypocrite.'

She knew that he wasn't jealous, he didn't care, so why did his words stab her? She asked furiously, 'Does it make you feel better about Liliás, deciding that I'm having an affair with somebody?'

'I'm not the sensitive type. I don't have much trouble with my conscience.' He went back to the table, back to his work.

'Great,' she grated. 'Good for you.' She glared at him, 'And who's supposed to be coming up here tomorrow? Roy? Edmund? I could have a choice these days, you know, I really could.'

Kern wasn't jealous, but from the line of mouth and jaw she knew he was angry, and she said, 'There is nobody coming.'

'Don't lie!'

It gave him a let-out although he was angry, but she wasn't a hypocrite and why should he get away with groundless accusations?

'All right,' she offered, 'I won't go down in the morning. I'll sit it out right here and then you'll see that nobody comes.'

'Not when they see my car they won't,' he said grimly.

Of course, Kern's car was in the clearing as well as hers. She might have said, 'Sit in your wretched car, then, and wait.' But he wouldn't wait because it didn't matter, and she said wearily, 'Oh, think what you like, but *please* **Will** you turn that lamp out and go to bed? I can't sleep while it's on.'

Astonishingly he said, 'You'd better take the bed. I haven't finished yet.' 'Upstairs, you mean? You'll stay down here?'

The look he gave her said all over again that he wouldn't come near her, and she had to get away from him, she couldn't stand it any longer. She threw aside the sheets, got into her skirt and shoes, which

were all she had taken off, and hesitated at the doorway of the stairs to mutter, 'I don't know if you'll manage to sleep on that mattress on the floor.'

'I will,' he said, without looking up again.

The lamp still burned in the bedroom window. Kern must have seen it glow as he climbed the mountain. 'One day,' she had said a long time ago, 'I'll have a house all on its own, with an oil lamp in the window, and if you knock on my door...'

She knelt down by the wooden chest, her head bowed, gripping the edge with fingertips, trying to close her mind to the memories.

I hate him, she told herself. He doesn't care how he hurts me, but so long as I hate him it shouldn't hurt.

But it was hurting, being alone in that empty room. She didn't want to sleep here, she would rather have stayed downstairs. In that bed she might wake from troubled sleep, and stretch out her hand and touch nothing. If she did that the torture in her heart would overflow and fill the whole world. But she had to get into the bed, she couldn't crouch here on the floor all night.

She undressed and turned out the lamp, and she could hear Kern moving about downstairs. He was certainly restless. It was chilly between the sheets, and Philippa hunched on to her own side of the bed, aching head against the cold pillow. She could hear every movement. Although the outer walls were thick the upstairs floorboards made the downstairs ceiling, and in the darkness now it was as though Kern was in this room.

She tasted salt on her lips and realised that her face was wet with tears. She must not weep. If her eyes were red and swollen in the morning how could she face him? She burrowed deeper, pulling the pillow and the blankets over her ears, shutting sounds out so that all

she could hear was the beat of her own heart, young and strong enough to last another fifty years. She had never listened to her own heartbeats before and now she wished they would stop.

It was a nightmare of a night, and when daylight came she knew that it was going to be a dark day. There was ice inside the windows and she scratched it with a fingertip, then breathed on the glass and rubbed a peephole.

She blinked at what she saw and rubbed harder, using a nail file as a scraper, clearing the four small panes and standing back aghast. Thick icicles hung from the guttering, and beyond them snow was still falling. Everything was white, even trees and scrubs had disappeared. The icicles at the window looked like bars and she thought—I'm in the cage with the tiger, and there'll be no escape today.

She had never had claustrophobia, but she was near to it now, trying to open the window and finding the catch frozen hard. If she had been alone she wouldn't have cared, but to be shut in with Kern was going to be hell.

And he wouldn't be exactly delighted. She dressed in one of the thick jumpers and skirts she had brought along, her mind whirling with practical problems. The fuel store was right against the house, a full paraffin tank was in the kitchen, and there were boxes of candles. The chemical loo was a short stone's throw away and surely the snow wasn't deep enough to bury a six-foot-high stone building. There was a lot of food. This morning she would put the tins in order, busy herself organising the cupboards.

She would keep very busy indeed and perhaps soon the snow would turn to rain, or the sun would break through that black sky, and Kern knew the paths and he would get her down as soon as it was humanly

possible, because he wanted her out of the way as much as she wanted to go.

She half expected he would still be asleep. She didn't know how late he'd worked and she hadn't heard him since she woke, but when she opened the door at the bottom of the stairs he was sitting by the fire, and she asked, 'You haven't been there all night, have you?'

'Of course I haven't.'

'Have you looked outside?' He must have done, because the shutters were open again and the snowflakes whirled against the window. 'What are we going to do?' she asked.

'Not much we can do,' he said.

'We can't get down, can we?'

'We can't get down and no one can get up, and believe me, I'm as sorry about that as you are.'

Philippa didn't think so. She didn't think she bothered him as much as he bothered her. She said crisply, 'Let's hope it isn't for long.'

'It could be for the winter,' he said, and that finished her blase act. She swayed a little, one hand clutching a chair back, croaking,

'You are joking, aren't you? You don't mean that?'

'I was stuck up here for a couple of months once,' he told her. 'I wrote the best part of a book. That's why I always leave the store cupboard full.' He began to laugh. 'Roy Wesk should be thanking his stars he didn't follow you. If he'd gone missing for two months it might have been hard to explain when he got back to the office and his old man.'

'Roy wasn't coming,' she protested, but Kern didn't believe her, so she was wasting her breath.

'Let's cut this out and do some straight talking,' she said wearily. 'We're stuck with each other until the snow clears, so we'd better be as civilised about it as we can.'

Two months? How many days and nights was that? She would be a nervous wreck before two months was up. She sat down in the other chair, by the table, biting a thumb nail and thinking there must be some way of getting down the mountain, even if it went on snowing. This was Wales, not the Himalayas.

'We're both agreed on one thing, aren't we?' Kern was saying. 'Our marriage was a mistake.'

Philippa said, 'Yes,' quickly and fiercely, because if she had hesitated she might have said, 'I don't know,' and of course it was when he wanted Liliás, and he wouldn't believe that she hadn't planned to come here with Roy. If there was no love and no trust it had to be a mistake.

He took off his ring and put it down before her on the table. 'All right,' he said. 'We're both free agents, we've just met, and now let's have some tolerance between strangers.'

She dragged at her own rings, slamming them down beside his, and she looked at the big triangular-cut diamond on the rough wooden table, and wondered if he would give it to Liliás. Then she lifted her chin and said, 'I thought you said yesterday you weren't in the mood for playing games.'

He hadn't shaved, and he looked as though he hadn't slept well, and he said drily, 'It's either playacting or a fair chance there'll be murder done up here. Now, do you want any breakfast?'

'How kind,' she drawled, and as his face darkened, 'Shall I get it?' His patience was on a hair trigger, and if they might be stuck up here together for days—she wouldn't consider weeks, that simply couldn't happen—she must behave sensibly, like pretending he was someone she had only just met.

He said, 'I'll share the cooking if you like.'

'You've got something else to do. I haven't, so I might as well get the meals.' If they were strangers she wouldn't know he could cook, she would only know at first sight that he was a big man who could do most things. 'How long do you really think we'll be here?' she asked. 'Seriously.'

He hadn't been joking, and now he said, 'I don't know. It could clear in a few days, but it's too cold for a thaw yet. It's always been one of the hazards of these mountain houses, that they get snowed in for the winter.'

'How old is it? A hundred years?'

'Nearer two.'

This was the sort of conversation strangers might have. How *interesting*! Two hundred winters? Philippa tried to twist the rings on her finger, and although she was still looking at them on the table it was a shock to find them missing. She laced her hands together instead and said, 'A lot of people must have been snowed in. I wonder how they got on.'

Kern grinned slightly, 'There aren't any murders on record,' and she smiled.

'Please don't say there has to be a first time.'

He knew she was nervous, but they had to be civil to each other, although it was going to be hard to imagine he was a stranger. Her hand felt naked. She wished she could have said, 'I'm used to wearing my rings, I've never taken them off before. I think I'll put them on again, although I know they don't mean anything.'

But Kern scooped up all three and dropped them in the little vase she had bought for wild flowers, that stood on the mantelshelf. There were no flowers growing now, and no corn dolly by the vase.

She got up and went into the kitchen and told him, 'I bought some bacon and eggs.'

'So I saw.'

She had brought most of the food that was in the mews-house, and she was glad about that now. She asked, 'You were going to manage on the store cupboard?'

I've got some fresh stuff down in the car. I thought I'd bring it up in the daylight.' He rubbed his stubbly chin. 'Along with my razor and my typewriter and the rest of my luggage.'

'We can't even get down to the cars, I suppose?'

In answer he opened the door and beckoned her to come and look. The snow was almost as high as the windows, and the path he had cleared to the shutters was unbroken white now under still falling snow. They were in an immense silent wilderness of white world and grey sky, where there was no sound or movement. It was like the loneliness of a lost planet, as though they were the only living things. Cold struck her as she gasped, and she shivered, her teeth chattering, 'It's t-terrible!'

'You don't think it's beautiful?'

If she had not been trapped here with a stranger it would have been beautiful. 'It's so quiet.' Her lips felt frozen and her voice sounded hollow. 'Not even any birds, you can't even hear the snow settling. You feel you could scream and no one would hear.'

'Not a soul,' said Kern cheerfully, 'so any time you fancy having hysterics you can let rip. But just warn me before you start shrieking.' That was callous, but it produced a wobbling smile.

'Would you mind if I screamed now?' she asked.

'Shut the door first, we don't want to start an avalanche.' As she turned in alarm he smiled and shook his head. 'It's all right, there isn't much above us. Anything that comes down will be from the skies.' He closed the door. 'So scream away if you'll feel better for it while I get the breakfast.'

The idea of her standing in the middle of the room, screeching her head off while he fried the bacon, made her giggle. 'I'll scream after breakfast,' she said, 'I'll be in better voice after I've had some coffee.'

Usually coffee was all he had for breakfast, but he had eaten breakfast the last time they were here. Or rather the other man had, who looked like him and loved her.

The kettle was steaming on the hanging hook and Philippa put it on the side hob over the oven, poked the fire into flame and topped it with a few pieces of coal. Then went into the kitchen to mix porridge in the heavy iron saucepan. She balanced that on the fire and the top bar, stirring until it boiled, drawing it aside to simmer while she made two mugs of instant coffee and took one to the back door to Kern.

He was shovelling snow away from the door to the fuel shed with his back to her, and she called, 'Have you ever considered indoor plumbing? There's a lot of snow between here and the loo.'

'Have you ever considered what it would be like to be pushed off a mountain?' He threw a shovelful of what looked like rock-hard snow over his shoulder, and grinned at her, and she said,

'Coffee?' stepping outside.

'Thanks.' He took the mug from her. There was snow on his hair again, like last night, and snow falling light as a caress on her face. Philippa smiled twitchily and hurried back inside.

All this activity was giving an illusion of camaraderie. You joked when you were shovelling snow, or cooking under difficulties, it was a sort of reflex action. And she supposed the urge to brush the snow from his hair was a reflex action too because, just now, she had wanted to do that as much as she had longed to hit him last night.

She felt crazy and mixed up, and light-headed with the peppery stinging discomfort in her throat, eyes and nose, that meant she was in for a streaming cold.

That wasn't surprising, but it would be a nuisance. There were aspirins in a first aid box in the kitchen, and she took two with her coffee. She'd dose herself with them today and try to ward off the worst of it. In the meantime she sniffed and sneezed into a tissue, finishing cooking the porridge, and frying three bacon rashers in the iron frying pan that was almost as heavy as the saucepan.

'Breakfast!' she called, when the bacon was done. Kern came in with an armful of logs and she went out to bring more, it would be as well to have plenty of fuel indoors, but as she dropped her load he said,

'I'll see to that. Come and have some of this.'

He was ladling out the porridge into two bowls. It was lumpy, but it was nourishing, and with condensed milk not too unpalatable, and Philippa got it down although her throat was hurting.

They hardly spoke, but that meant that nothing was said that could flare into a quarrel. She put her rasher of bacon aside, it would come in later, and the porridge had been filling. Then she washed up and cleared away, while Kern took salt and ashes outside to scatter on the paths.

Afterwards he worked, and she went through the cupboards. She hadn't bothered much about the stores last time she was here. They had bought fresh food mostly, but now she made an inventory of everything. There was a good stock of tins, dried fruit, dehydrated vegetables, and ready-mix convenience foods in a large airtight tin. These were iron rations, enough for a long stay if she planned and used them sensibly.

But a long stay wouldn't only mean meals. It would mean being within earshot of Kern twenty-four hours a day, seeing him almost every time she raised her eyes. That would be her real problem, not how to eke out the food.

It was chilly in the kitchen, kneeling on the flagstones, writing out her lists, and the cold with which the aspirins were fighting a losing battle was making itself felt. She would go upstairs and make the bed and get something to read out of that old tin trunk of books, but then she would have to stay in the living room because that was where the fire was.

Kern didn't look up as she went through. He was writing by hand. His typewriter was in the car, and there was a bottle of ink in a drawer in the dresser, but she didn't know if it was full or not. She almost said, 'I hope the ink holds out,' but he didn't look up, so she didn't speak. It might be provocative behaviour to disturb him when he was engrossed in work, and there had to be consideration between strangers. She tidied the bed and stood at the window, looking through the bars of ice that seemed like dull silver between the startling brilliance of the snow and the flat unbroken grey of the sky. If she had

been here alone she would have managed very well, with food and fuel. She would be relaxed now instead of conscious all the time of Kern down there where he could hear every move, making her tense and shivery.

Of course her cold made her shiver. That was all it was, a horrible head cold, but perhaps it would be a risk getting yourself marooned alone up here. Suppose you were ill, or had an accident, then you'd be in trouble. Not that she would accept help from Kern if she was at death's door, and he'd have to be in a bad way before he'd be calling for her.

She dabbed her pink nose, then took a mirror out of her case and looked at herself, pink eyes, pink nose. She grimaced and began to make up her face. For her own satisfaction, not because it mattered if she looked a fright or not to Kern.

And without a razor he was going to be a scruffy character within the next couple of days. Philippa began to smile. A flaming red beard should have been something to smile at, but it probably wouldn't be; you didn't do much laughing with strangers.

He didn't look up when she came down either. She had found an ancient set of Dickens, in very cramped print that would make them hard to read when dusk came; and she sat by the fire now with *Our Mutual Friend*, which she hadn't read before, until it was time to heat soup for lunch.

They drank that from mugs, sitting apart, saying nothing. The only time Kern spoke was when she went out, muffled in a thick coat. Then he said, 'Don't wander away. The snow's stopped, but you could easily break your leg out there.'

'I realise that.' If she did he would have his hands full. That was what he was thinking. Not about her.

The snow was so hard that she did wonder if it might be possible to find a path, if you went very slowly and carefully. But it was a long way down. Even in the summer they had always used their cars so far as the track went. There was no wind, and although the cold was bitter it seemed to be clearing her head.

She breathed deeply, blinking at the stinging sharpness of it, and walked around very near the cottage, clapping her hands and stamping her feet until her cheeks were glowing and the blood was circulating briskly. When Kern opened the back door she was trotting up and down, and he stood for a moment watching her. Then he asked, 'What do you think you're doing?'

'I'm getting some exercise.'

'Watch it. It's slippery.'

'*I know.*' In a flounce of defiance she put her foot on a smooth patch and went whoosh, flat on her face. The breath was knocked out of her, but she wasn't hurt, and it was so silly, happening like that, that she would have begun to laugh as soon as she'd got her breath back. But he was coming across to her, and he was going to pick her up, and if she felt his arms around her she didn't know what kind of a fool she might make of herself. She gulped in air and gasped, 'Don't touch me!'

He stood, looking down at her, and her cheeks burned hotter at his sardonic expression. Then he said, 'You've got too much imagination.'

Philippa scrambled to her feet, and he turned and went back into the house while she brushed the snow from her coat. She brushed it slowly because she couldn't follow him right away, she was cringing from the self-inflicted humiliation. She had just reacted like a girl at bay, when all he was going to do was help her to her feet. She couldn't

apologise, unless she wanted to hear him say again that she had no attraction for him. And she couldn't explain—I wasn't afraid of what you might do to me, I was afraid what I might do...

So, what might she have done? She had too much imagination, perhaps she should have been the writer; Kern kept his fact and fiction firmly divided. She could imagine his arms around her. If he had held her and asked if she was all right she wouldn't have been able to play-act. She would have said that her head ached, and she thought she was going down with a feverish cold, and please could she have her rings back?

The exhilaration of freezing cold and vigorous activity was wearing off. She was beginning to feel muzzy-headed again as she plodded back into the cottage. The door between the kitchen and the living room was shut, and she took off her thick coat and started to prepare the dinner.

She was using one of the pastry mixes to cover a steak and kidney pie, and she stirred up the fire to get the oven hot and when it was ready took the pie in.

She was very quiet, creeping around like a mouse or a thief, almost holding her breath. The only sound was the rustle of papers, the movements he made, the ticking of her watch if she held it to her ear, and her sniffles.

He had told her to hope he would forget she was here, and she was making that as easy for him as she could. Probably he thought he was doing the same for her. Some chance, she thought ruefully, when you're sitting in the middle of the room and you're about as restful as a ticking bomb.

At any rate when the food was ready she was justified in suggesting he stop using the table as a desk and let her lay it for the meal. He put

all his papers on the dresser, and went to fetch knives and forks, still without speaking and with an abstracted air. He was still writing in his head, she supposed.

He took a chair and murmured, 'Thanks,' when she handed him a helping of pie. Cooking pastry in the side oven was a chancy process, but this didn't look too bad, although her cold was spoiling her appetite, and she gave herself a small helping.

Kern saw that, and frowned, 'Is that all you're having?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'You'll eat, even if you're not.' He took her plate and put another spoonful on it. 'You can't afford to fall ill. I warn you, I'm no nurse.'

'Nor I,' she said sweetly. 'So we'll each have to look after ourselves if we need nursing.' But the sight of the food was making her feel squeamish and she was sure she was beginning to run a temperature. She hadn't taken any aspirins since morning, but now she resolved to take some with a hot drink when she went to bed tonight. And she might stay in bed tomorrow.

She mashed her food, or cut it into very small pieces, to get it down her sore throat, but if Kern noticed her flushed face and watery eyes he didn't remark on them. Apart from the stubble of beard he looked fine, as though he had done a satisfying day's work and would sleep like a log.

Philippa sighed deeply before she could check it, and when he looked inquiringly at her she asked, 'What else did you do besides write when you were up here for two months? What else is there to do?'

'I had a radio.' He'd ordered her to turn hers off, so she'd remember that for future reference. 'I read,' he said, 'and I made some of the furniture.'

'What furniture?'

'This,' he tapped the table, 'and the chest upstairs.'

They were well made, and it shouldn't have surprised her because he was a practical man. But it made her look at the table again, and then she said with wistful envy, 'I wish I'd brought along something to occupy myself.'

He leaned back, eyeing her with a slow devilish grin. 'You were expecting more entertaining company, weren't you?'

She wasn't rising to that, but the thought of Roy or Edmund stranded up here, completely out of their element, made her bow her head to hide a wry smile, and Kern said, 'Hard luck,' harshly enough to wipe the smile away.

She tried to say, 'Can't you see how ridiculous that idea is?' but he was saying,

'I don't know what you're going to do with yourself to pass the time. The books upstairs are a fairly mixed lot, you could plough through them.'

After a moment she ventured, 'You haven't got your typewriter, so why can't I take down notes for you?'

'No, thanks,' he said promptly, which was sheer prejudice and made her wish she hadn't offered.

'I'm a good secretary,' she said heatedly, and his sarcastic,

'Who told you that? Roy Wesk?' made her even angrier. But she really was not up to arguing. She ate a very little more and then made some tea, and even swallowing that was an effort.

Kern had produced a book and was reading, and when Philippa turned on her radio for the weather forecast they both listened. It wasn't encouraging. It told them there had been heavy falls of snow, especially in high areas—as if they didn't know that—and that there were no immediate signs of conditions improving.

After the meal she huddled close to the fire, while Kern read or worked at the table. She didn't turn to look at him, so she didn't know which. The radio played softly beside her, he hadn't complained about it and it was something to listen to, but she was feeling increasingly groggy.

Down in civilisation it would have been a hot bath and a warm bed, and if she wasn't right as rain in the morning at least she would have been on the mend. But up here it was spartan conditions shared with somebody who had warned her against falling ill. She would hate to be thrown on his mercies, even to asking him to get her a hot drink, and the more she brooded on that the worse she felt.

At last she asked, 'Would you mind if I slept down here tonight? It's so cold upstairs.' She sneezed as she spoke. She daren't risk tonight in that chilly bedroom. If there was any argument she'd go on sitting right here with her thick coat on. But Kern said,

'Take your choice,' so she got up to unroll the horsehair mattress and the bundle of bedclothes.

He began putting his papers in order on the dresser and laying the table for breakfast, all his movements quick and purposeful. Down on her knees Philippa dithered, tucking in sheets and blankets, stopping to dab her nose with a tissue, feeling wretched, and resentful because he was coping so comfortably and she was all frayed edges with a streaming cold.

She said, 'It must be useful to have two worlds going for you. One outside and one in your head.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Do you want a hot drink?'

'No, thank you.' Of course she did, but she couldn't say—yes, please. He made himself a meat extract drink and took it, and the second lamp upstairs. He said 'Goodnight,' as he went, and she muttered,

'Goodnight,' and wondered if she should take her temperature on that thermometer in the first aid box. When she wasn't shivering she was sweating, so she must have a temperature, but if she had what could she do about it, except go to bed?

The water in the kettle was cold. Kern had filled it after he'd made his own drink and put it on the side hob, and she hadn't the energy to stir up the banked- down fire and wait for the water to heat again. So she got ready for bed and turned out the lamp.

She had hardly slept at all the two previous nights, and tonight she fell into an unnaturally heavy slumber, waking after an hour or two with a thick head and a throat like hot sandpaper.

More than anything else she needed a drink now, and it would have been wonderful to have been able to call someone to get it for her. But she was on her own, and as soon as she crawled out of bed she started to shiver.

The fire gave hardly any light and the shutters were closed, and she groped for matches on the dresser and a candle out of the first drawer, lit the candle and stood it on a saucer. Then she went to the fire, poked it up, and hung the kettle low. Tea would do. Anything that was warm and comforting.

She sat down again in the chair in front of the fire, pulling a blanket round her. She had been very quiet, although Kern was probably

sound asleep, and now she hunched up, face cupped in her hands, watching the growing glow between the black bars.

She *would* stay in bed tomorrow. Down here, well covered with blankets. It was nothing to be ashamed of, anybody could catch a cold at this time of year, and it seemed to her now that she had been shivering ever since Kern went away.

The fire glow was warm on her face and almost hypnotic, until the prickling in her nose turned into a sneeze and she took her hands from her ears. Then she heard the soft crackling sound and looked round.

Flames were dancing along the dresser, and she grabbed the kettle and ran with it, pouring steaming water on the burning blackening papers that sent up hissing clouds of smoke. In seconds the fire was out, the dresser was swimming in hot water that cascaded over the edge, and the portions of paper that were not reduced to messy wet ashes seemed to have been washed clean of ink.

As the enormity of this struck her she heard Kern coming down the stairs.

CHAPTER NINE

'WHAT'S going on?' Kern demanded as he stepped through the doorway at the bottom of the stairs.

'Nothing,' she panted. 'Nothing.' There was only the firelight now and she might have had some idiotic notion that he wouldn't see and that would give her time to repair the damage. But you could taste the afcoke, and the steam was still rising as he walked towards the dresser.

There went his notes, his work. He'd go berserk. How was she going to explain why she'd left a candle on a saucer so near to a pile of important papers that when it fell over the papers caught fire? She didn't know it was going to fall over, but it was a stupid place to put a candle, and if she had seen it sooner she wouldn't have had to pour nearly boiling water over everything. She was lucky she wasn't scalded. She would be lucky if he didn't kill her.

She said in rising panic, 'I didn't mean to do it. I wanted a hot drink. I lit the candle and put the kettle on and sat by the fire, and I didn't realise what was happening until all the papers were burning.'

As he turned she shrank away. 'Please don't--' she was going to say, 'don't touch me'. She was scared because it seemed to her that nothing she could do to Kern would infuriate him more than destroying his work, but he sounded impatient rather than angry.

'For God's sake don't start that again,' he said. 'Get to the fire—I'll have to open the door to let the smoke out.' He was wearing pyjama trousers, bare-foot, bare-chested. He put on the trench coat that was hanging in the kitchen and opened the front door.

The icy air swirled in as the fumes were sucked out, so that in a very short time the atmosphere inside the cottage was clean and pure and freezing. Then he shut the door, and lit the lamp on the table, and

Philippa, who was crouched in the chair by the fire, whispered, 'I'm sorry, I wouldn't have done that for the world. It was an accident.'

'I know that.' Well, of course he knew she wouldn't do it on purpose, but why wasn't he raving at her for her carelessness? He refilled the kettle and hung it on the hook over the fire, then went to the dresser, picked up some of his papers, shaking the water off them and apparently giving it up as a bad job.

She waited for the reaction of anger. Then he asked, 'Why did it have to be hot water? You could have scalded yourself, and there's cold water in the kitchen.' And snow piled up outside the door. Philippa shook her throbbing head,

'The kettle was the nearest.' But boiling water had made a lot more mess of everything. 'I'm sorry,' she sniffed, 'I panicked. And please don't be angry, because I know I was a fool to leave the candle there and I couldn't feel worse about it.'

'You'd feel much worse if you'd burned the house down.' He sounded as though he was smiling and she blinked, leaning forward in her huddle of blanket to stare, disbelieving, at him smiling at her.

It was like getting a reprieve, and tears rolled down her cheeks and she couldn't do a thing about them except go on sniffing and rub them away and explain, 'It's the smoke, and the reaction, and I do have this streaming cold.'

'Get back into bed,' he ordered. 'I'll make your drink-:'

Philippa crept under the bedclothes. Her breath was still spangling the air, but soon the lamp and the fire would warm the little room. She watched Kern moving around, bare feet and blue pyjama trousers under the flapping trench coat, and said, 'You'll c-catch c-cold without your shoes on.'

'I'll sit by the fire,' he said.

The kettle seemed to heat quickly. She lay there for a little while, not saying anything, watching the firelight and the man in the chair, wondering what he was thinking. And then he got up and took the kettle into the kitchen, bringing her back a steaming mug. 'What is it?' she asked.

'A brandy toddy. Medicinal. We've got a small flask of it, for shock and cold.'

'You had a shock too.'

He chuckled. 'You're right there, but I'm not still shaking from it.'

Philippa was. Her hands shook around the warm mug she was lifting to her lips. She gulped some of the brandy and hot water, and felt its warmth coursing through her. In the morning she would be fine. She said, 'It would be quicker to dictate to me, then you could get it down before you forget it. You could give me a test first, I'll surprise you, I promise.'

'Not for the first time,' he said drily. She wasn't sure how he meant that. 'We'll see tomorrow,' he said, turning off the lamp. 'And if you need anything else shout, don't strike any more matches.'

Philippa sipped her medicinal beverage, and listened to him going up the stairs, crossing the room; then silence, which meant he was in bed again, trying to get back to sleep. She must have cried out when she saw the fire, that was what had disturbed him.

'Shout if you need anything,' he had just told her. What if she called him and when he came she said,

'I need you, here, close by me. Why didn't you tuck in a blanket or touch my shoulder, then I could have reached and held your hand?'

Why don't you stay with me now? I need you here. Please. I want you.'

It was all true, but she couldn't say it tonight, especially after she had just drunk a mug full of brandy toddy. He might think she didn't know what she was saying. She knew one thing, though, no other man could ever take his place for her.

She was getting near the dregs of her drink, and beginning to feel sleepy.

Know-all Liliias had been wrong about Kern's work mattering more than anything. Of course it mattered, but he had understood about the fire being an accident and that Philippa was as shocked about it as he was.

Liliias ... thought Philippa, setting down her empty mug with a resounding thump. Detestable woman!

'Are you all right?' Kern called.

'Come down,' she said silently. Aloud she called back, 'I banged the mug on the flagstone, I think I've cracked it.'

'The mug or the flagstone?'

'The mug. Luckily it's empty. How much brandy was in that drink?' You hardly had to raise your voice, you could hear so clearly, downstairs to upstairs.

'From the sound of it more than enough,' he said. 'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.' She began to float into sleep, thinking—he's convinced I didn't plan to come here alone and he is so wrong, so perhaps I could be wrong too, even if Liliias did send a card to her sister. I'm not

getting out of the way for Liliás, I'm not getting out of the way for anybody ...

She woke feeling much better. Probably because she felt happier. It hadn't been a dream. The mug was on the flagstones beside her, and the burned and washed out papers were still on the dresser, and there was hope in life again.

Usually the inspired flashes of insight that come when you are falling asleep are nonsense in the morning, "but Philippa's last thought seemed sound by morning light. Kern was wrong about her, so perhaps she was wrong about him.

Pride didn't matter. For weeks she had held her head high and pretended, and she wasn't going to pretend any more. She was better for him than Liliás, she knew she was, and she was going to fight for her marriage. But here, in the intimacy of this lovely little house, was their chance to start building again, and this morning she would tell him how much he mattered to her.

He didn't seem to be up yet, and she washed and dressed and opened the shutters. She would put the pretty cups and saucers on the table, the ones she had bought last time she was here. She hadn't used them this time, nor set a table as though a meal mattered. But this morning she would, and she would wear her rings again.

If Kern still said no chance, the marriage was finished, then she'd accept that. Or seem to accept it, because it wasn't finished. Today she was sure he was going to let her help with his work and she knew she could handle that. She would be a secretary he couldn't afford to lose.

She smiled a sweet and secret smile, and when this beastly cold was better and she wasn't sniffing and sneezing she'd be a wife he couldn't

bear to lose either, because the thought of him was a surge of delight in her. She had been his delight and she would be again.

It didn't look as though there had been any more snow in the night, and although there was a wind rising this morning it was freezing so hard that the fallen snow was undisturbed. The world outside was still an unbroken white wilderness, except for the black winding road far below. You couldn't see the farmhouse and the farm buildings. Snow on the roofs had camouflaged them into invisibility.

The ground was very hard indeed, like walking on white rock, but you could walk around. It would be a tremendous physical ordeal to climb all the way down the mountain, but if you tested every step you might just possibly be able to reach the cars.

If I did that, Philippa thought, I could bring back Kern's typewriter, and maybe some more fresh food. Perhaps his razor. That would be something. Oh, I would like to do that.

She was in a state of euphoria this morning. Every-thing seemed rosier, all sorts of impossible things were possible again. After the weeks of disciplining herself into scrupulously circumspect behaviour she felt released and exhilarated. She was also running a slight temperature and not thinking too clearly.

She told herself that she would soon know if she could do it. She would only go a little way, keeping in sight of the cottage. Then she would decide if she should risk going on. The cars were in a clearing in a dip, and although you couldn't see it from the cottage if you kept going down and round you were bound to come to them, or the track that led up to the clearing. She felt she could pinpoint the spot, and it wasn't so very far. It took about twenty minutes normally from the cottage to the end of the track.

There was still no sound of Kern, and she got his keys out of his trench coat pocket, then put on her own thick coat and tied a scarf round her head, then let herself out of the house, very quietly this time.

She tried to visualise the way down, twisting and winding among the rocks, but today there was nothing familiar out there. Even the crag that rose behind and above the cottage had lost its sharp outline, the frozen streams were hidden under the snow, but it was piercingly beautiful. The skies were snow white, and she was warm in thick clothing and boots.

When a few more feathery flakes came fluttering down that only added to the magic of it all. She looked back continually, using the cottage as her landmark, making slow progress but confident now that she could reach., the cars. Although the north-east wind was numbing her face and she held her scarf over mouth and nose.

It was slippery, of course. When she trod on a treacherous patch and felt herself sliding it was what she had expected, and she collapsed limply into a drifted heap of snow. Beneath the surface layer of ice the snow was powdery, melting coldly in her mouth, and against her tight-shut eyelids, taking her breath away.

When she got up she felt light-headed and she took the next few steps very carefully indeed. The little floating flakes were thickening, and after another half dozen or so steps she stopped. The shake-up had disorientated her sense of direction, she wasn't sure which way she was facing, and if it was starting snowing again in earnest she would have to give up and go back.

But—she couldn't see the cottage, it was just white mountain, and she had a second of panic as though a lifeline had slipped from her grasp before she pulled herself together. The cottage *was* there, a minute

ago she had been able to see it, and since then she had only moved a few yards.

She looked for her footsteps, but it was hard ground, and little bumps and indentations seemed to go in all directions. She had walked straight since she fell, she was almost sure she had followed a straight line, so that must be the pile of snow she had fallen in and just before she fell she had looked up at the cottage.

She went back and stood where she was almost sure she had fallen, looking around her with mounting desperation as she saw nothing she recognised. The crag of the mountain top was there of course, but not the cottage. There was nothing near the crag except shapeless things that must have been rocks and the snow was coming faster and she was lost.

Philippa tried to reason out where she was, to recall the way she had walked with Kern in high summer, and with Bron and Hew just before the snow came. But the snow had transformed everything on the mountain, rocks and crags up here, trees and hedges on the lower slopes; and all the time the falling flakes came faster, masking the road far below, cutting down visibility.

Perhaps she should try to get down. But it was a long and perilous way, and realising she was lost had also made her realise that she was not as strong as she had believed. Suddenly her legs felt weak and her eyes were smarting, and she knew that she *couldn't* get down. Even if she reached the cars she wouldn't be able to find her way back or go any further, and she didn't want to go down. She wanted to get back to Kern and the cottage which was somewhere on the mountain. Once she could see it again she could climb to it.

Very cautiously she began to move back up the slope. There were hummocks and snow-covered rocks wherever she looked. She skirted the rocks and the higher hummocks, and avoided the obvious gullies,

but now there was fresh snow on frozen snow, so that more than once she stumbled into drifts, and floundering through them came near to utter exhaustion.

She dared not rest. She knew what kind of danger she was in, although she wouldn't let herself think about it. But so long as she kept moving she was all right, and either she would come across the cottage or Kern would be out looking for her.

Several times she tried to shout for help, but the snow choked her and she was gasping so that Kern's name was no more than a whisper in her ears. But she was getting back, somehow she was getting back, although by now her feet were dragging as though her boots were soled in iron, and every breath sent jagged pains through her lungs.

She crawled and staggered and scrambled, fighting the whirling snow like a swimmer in deep water, and the pain in her chest was now in her side too, stabbing all the time, and she mustn't stop, she dared not rest, she must keep moving or she would never find Kern again.

She came to a pinnacle of rock and pressed herself against it, clinging to it as some kind of brief shelter. She thought she remembered a tall thin rock— although there were probably dozens of them and it was hard to tell the shape of this one, encrusted with ice and blurred by snow. But she had a vague memory of a rock like this, on the right as they wound around the mountain climbing to the cottage, so she must bear to the left. Whether this was the same rock or not it gave her hope that she had a bearing, and she moved away from the shelter of the pinnacle on to the bare face of the mountain.

The cold had penetrated her clothing and her skin. It was in her bones and she had never known a cold like it. The perspiration of her exertions froze on her forehead, the only thing keeping her moving was her desperate need to get back to the cottage. I will get back ... I will get back ... she told herself with every dragging step she took.

The slope was steep here, but the snow was deep and held her despite the angle. Through the needling snow flurry she could hardly see ahead at all, but if she continued moving to the left she would get some shelter some time. Enough to look around and see if she could spot the cottage. The next shelter she came to she would stay for a few minutes, not sitting, of course, banging hands and feet to keep them alive, and getting back her breath and her strength. Then she could call for help. Anywhere out of the snow.

There was no shelter at all here, she was on an open slope, hard under the snow. Then, without warning, beneath her feet the under-surface suddenly shifted and slithered, and she went plunging headlong with it.

This time there was no cushioned stillness to break her fall. The scree on which the snow had rested was in movement. Her footsteps had started it, but it gathered instantaneous speed and size, carrying her along behind a massive front wave of stones and snow, screaming in demented terror. Nothing could save her now, she had pulled the mountain down with her, and she was a dead woman falling for ever.

She was not dead. She was staring up at the sky, and cold, so cold. She was buried in snow, only her head and shoulders free, arms and legs gripped in an icy vice. She screamed for Kern, again and again and again, and then she began to pray, and then she heard her name.

Kern was near, she could hear him clearly. She gulped in more of the snow-filled air, and didn't stop screaming until he was beside her. But the moment she saw him she fainted.

When she opened her eyes again she was huddled against him and he was saying, 'It's all right, you're all right—wake up, love, come on now!'

She managed to say 'Yes,' although her lips were almost too stiff to move, and the sensation of his fingers on her face was strange. He was rubbing her cheek, patting feeling back into the numb flesh. Now he lifted her gently so that it seemed she was standing and asked,

'Can you stand?'

She nodded, but when he loosed her her knees buckled and she was back on the ground. 'I'm f-frozen,' she said through chattering teeth. 'I can hardly feel my feet.' She moved them with difficulty, but they did move and so did her arms, and she was sitting up, so her back was all right.

Snow was piled high all around, not white snow, snow streaked with earth. After a moment Kern said, 'I'll have to carry you.' He sounded as though that presented problems, although he could probably have picked her up in one hand, and Philippa said jerkily,

'I'll manage. How far are we from the farm?'

'The farm's still at the bottom of the mountain.' The snow was whirling around him and she blinked her eyelids, croaking,

'But we *have* come down? We *are* at the bottom?' By hanging on to him she was managing to climb to her feet. Still hanging on, she looked around. She could see the cleared path on the mountainside where the snow and scree had slithered down around her, not more than a couple of hundred feet before the little avalanche had piled into a huge ramp here. 'Where are we?' she asked, and Kern said wryly,

'If you'd rolled to the bottom of the mountain you'd be past caring where you were.'

'It seemed such a long way.' She had seemed to be falling for miles, but it was far enough to tumble helplessly, and if he hadn't come she

would not have been able to free herself. 'Thank God you heard me,' she whispered.

'Sounds carry up here.' She was still holding on to him but putting most of her weight on her own feet. She could understand now why he didn't want her a dead weight. Climbing back to the cottage with both arms full of girl would be very risky indeed.

'I can walk,' she said. 'Is it far?'

'No.'

They mustn't waste time, the snow was still falling, although it didn't occur to her that he might get lost too. She was still frozen, out on the mountainside, and that fall should have taken her last remnants of strength, but she was finding reserve resources from somewhere. She had second wind and a second chance. She was safe now, she just had to keep close to Kern and he would get her home.

When she saw the cottage again, after ten minutes' careful progress, she wasn't surprised. Just deeply thankful. It was much later that she felt she should have been surprised.

She stumbled to the chair by the fire, taking off her coat and her boots and rubbing her frozen feet with frozen fingers. All she wanted to do now was sleep, but she had to get warm first. Kern took the oven plate out of the side oven, wrapped it in a towel and put it in the bed. Philippa had never thought of warming up the bed that way. She'd try to remember that, although her mind was so woolly she wasn't sure she would remember anything. Then he took her hands, holding them, rubbing them. 'You'll survive,' he said.

'Will my fingers and toes?' It was a weak joke, she had never felt weaker, she just wanted to go to sleep. 'That hurts!' she protested as 'pins and needles' prickled her. 'Can I go to bed?'

'Get your wet clothes off,' he said, and she tried to obey and unfasten her skirt, but her fingers were stiff and clumsy and she felt him undo it. It was soaking wet. Her tights were wet and torn and he took those off too. Her eyes were closed and her head drooped. She wondered if she was fainting again or so exhausted that she was becoming comatose, because she could not have undressed herself. She couldn't have moved from this chair to the bed.

He took out the oven plate and carried her over, then ordered, 'Don't go to sleep until you've had a hot drink.' But she didn't believe she could stay awake while he fetched whatever it was he wanted her to drink. She couldn't have said what it was. It was warm and most of it went down her throat, but he held the mug to her lips and she didn't remember him taking it away before she slipped into the deepest slumber of her life.

She slept the whole day and most of the following night. She did not know how Kern watched over her. When he touched her brow she felt nothing, through the fever that made her burning hot at first, ebbing at last and leaving her pale, with shadows around her dark eyelids and hollowing her cheekbones, the fair fine hair in straggling disarray.

She was worn out, and when she stirred and opened her eyes she was still so tired that she almost closed' them again. But the lamp was burning on the table, and at her slight movement Kern looked up from the book he was reading. He came across and said 'Have some soup before you go to sleep again.'

'I--' Her voice was a croak. She tried again. 'I don't think I'm very hungry.' But he was dishing it up from the saucepan on the hob and bringing the steaming bowl across to her. There was another pillow behind her and she heaved herself up, asking, 'However long have I been asleep?'

'Can you manage this?'

'Of course.' But when she was handed bowl and spoon she wasn't so sure, she still felt weak as water. "Thank you," she said. She noticed that the red beard was growing fast but it didn't change him as much as you would expect. He stood there, watching her, waiting for her to eat, and she scooped up a spoonful and said nervously, 'It's nice. I'm sorry to be a nuisance. I'm glad you changed your mind about not nursing me if I fell ill.'

'I didn't have much choice.' He didn't sound sympathetic. He sounded as though she was a nuisance, and tears of weakness filled her eyes. She said, humbly because he had saved her life,

'Thank you for finding me.'

'Again, there wasn't much choice. I could hardly leave you out there.' He was almost glaring at her, and she sat holding her soup bowl, huge dark eyes in her small pale face, as he said harshly, 'If I'd known you were so desperate to get away I'd have given odds against your reaching the road alive, on your own, at about a hundred to one. But I thought you realised that.'

Philippa had known when she was lost out there. When she was falling she had thought she had no chance at all. She said quietly, 'Yes, I do realise that I could have died,' and although that was what he was saying himself he flinched. Then Kern said,

'But you consider being stuck up here with me a fate worse than death?'

'Is that a joke?' It wasn't what he was saying that mattered. It was how he had looked just now, when he had flinched as though from an unbearable pain. Now he went back to the table, sitting down heavily, saying brusquely,

'I'm not laughing.'

Philippa put down her soup bowl. She needed both hands to try to explain, gesturing hesitantly, feeling her way. 'I still feel stupid,' she said. 'It was stupid, I know that now, but it looked hard and firm underfoot, and I wasn't trying to get all the way down. Only to the cars.'

His eyes sought and held hers. 'What did you want to get to the cars for? Even if they'd started it would have been suicide to drive them.'

I wanted to get your typewriter. I thought it would be a help in getting the work done again.'

'You were coming back?' He was incredulous, and she said fervently,

'Yes. Yes, of course I was coming back, but it started to snow and I lost sight of the cottage. Of *course* I wanted to get back here.'

He leaned back in his chair, shaking his head in wonderment. 'You went out in this weather, with a feverish cold on you, to collect a typewriter that was half way down a ruddy mountain?'

She gave a small nod and said in a small voice, 'It wasn't snowing when I went, and I was feeling better than I have since I came up here. I thought the toddy had cured my cold.'

He whistled silently, then began to laugh. 'They call it rapture of the heights,' he said. 'Ever heard of it?'

'Oh yes. It means going a little off your head at very high altitudes.'

'This will probably be the first recorded case in Wales, so finish your soup, you could be a celebrity.'

She docilely emptied the bowl. She was aching, but only her arms and legs and head, not her heart any more. As she handed him the bowl back she asked, 'What time is it?' and he checked his watch.

'Twenty past seven. Dawn should be breaking.' He went -outside to open the shutters, and a pale light streamed into the room.

'Is it melting?' she asked as soon as he came back.

'No.' He turned off the lamp. There was just enough light from the windows and the fire to see, so long as you didn't need to see too clearly. He went across to warm his hands, as though the few minutes outside had been biting cold, telling her, 'And it was snowing most of yesterday.'

Yesterday was the last thing she remembered. Yesterday morning. So she must have slept for nearly twenty-four hours and she wondered, 'Did you get any sleep?'

'On and off.'

'You look awful.' She could see by the firelight that he was haggard, although he grinned at her.

'There's gratitude,' he said, and yawned, and she wanted to hug him, to cuddle and comfort him. She *loved* him. She loved him when he was strong and when he was weak, and right now he looked worse than she felt, with a pallor under the tan and the red stubble of beard. He sat down by the fire, watching her, weariness in the slump of his shoulders- He had said their marriage was finished, but they were together again now and nobody else mattered.

Suddenly he said, 'Lilias wasn't with me last week, you know.'

'Oh!' she breathed softly and thankfully, and he went on in an almost toneless voice,

'She's never been with me since I met you. She's been around, but she has not been with me.' He turned, so that Philippa couldn't see his face

at all, and although she yearned to go to him she felt she should be quiet and hear what he had to tell her.

'She came down on Wednesday,' he went on. 'I went back to the hotel and they told me there was a lady waiting for me. I thought it was you.'

'Me?' Philippa squeaked in spite of her resolve to be silent. Kern shrugged broad shoulders, his back still to her.

'I thought you might have come. She didn't get much of a welcome, she stayed under ten minutes.' The voice was wryly amused now and Philippa smiled, imagining Liliás maliciously sending that card to her sister, knowing how quickly the gossip would spread and reach Philippa. She had worked like a beaver to undermine this marriage and so many people believed she had succeeded: Philippa's parents, friends and acquaintances.

But Liliás had never been with Kern. They were not lovers. He must still love Philippa, and she had wanted to go with him last week but he hadn't asked her to. He had left his address, that was all. 'Why should I have turned up at the hotel?' she asked.

'Why shouldn't you?' He turned to face her then. 'I ran after you. That's why I'm here. I didn't come to write, I came after you.'

'So Hew *did* tell you?' She clasped her hands together in delight. As soon as Hew phoned Kern and told him she was here, and there was a danger of her being snowed in, he had come.

'They told me when I arrived,' said Kern, 'but I'd been to the mews house first.' He poked the fire, which was burning nicely and didn't need disturbing. 'I went back,' he said, 'to see if you'd missed me, because God knows I'd missed you, but you'd gone. I rang your home and your mother and father were away and nobody was expecting you

there.' He put down the poker. 'Then,' he said, 'I went to see Roy Wesk, and he knew where you were.'

She said, 'Poor old Roy! What else did he tell you?' remembering Kern's thunderous face when he'd turned up here.

'That you wouldn't be expecting *me*,' said Kern, grimly -emphatic.

'I wasn't expecting anyone,' and this time he was going to believe her.

He said, 'I thought he was planning to follow you.'

'He wouldn't have followed me, he didn't know where I was. I told him I was going to a cottage in Wales, but I didn't say where.' This was their cottage and their secret, hers and Kern's, lit by firelight and dawn and love, and she said softly, 'I wouldn't have let Roy come here.'

'He says he's in love with you.'

So he had told her, when he was offering her his parents' home to run to, and his shoulder to cry on. There was always more compassion than passion in Roy, and she explained, 'That's because he's sorry for me. He'd heard about the card Liliass sent her sister, I suppose everybody has, and sympathy is Roy's kick. He does so enjoy feeling sorry for people.'

She was smiling, but Kern still sounded grave, asking, 'What about you? How do you feel about him?'

Philippa lifted her shoulders. 'I like him.'

'So you keep saying.' It would have been hard to dislike Roy, but of course there had never been anything deeper, and Kern must see how ridiculous the question was.

'Are you seriously asking me if I'm in love with Roy?'

It seemed he was. He said, 'He's security. You might feel safer with him than you do with me.'

'Do you want me to feel safer with Roy?' She stiffened as she waited, but his, '*No...*' was a groan, and she unclenched the ringless fingers she had tensed and said mischievously, 'You think he'd make a more reliable father figure?'

'Something like that.'

'But I don't want another father, thank you, the one I've got is more than enough. And as for feeling safe--' she stretched out her arms and they glimmered palely and Kern got to his feet, 'I wouldn't have screamed for Roy out there, but I knew I was safe when you reached me.'

He reached her now, kneeling on the flagstones beside her, putting his arms around her as she wound hers around his neck so that they were locked together. 'Why on earth would I want Roy?' she asked him.

He kissed her gently and she melted against him, then they looked at each other with drowsy smilingeyes and she said, 'Now I *can* see why you might prefer Liliás.' She could be generous now Liliás was no danger at all, she could even admit, 'She's more exciting than I am.'

'You think so?' Not really, she just wanted to hear him say it. 'Compared to you Liliás is a rest cure,' he said, still sitting on the flagstones, one arm around her, telling her, 'If she'd got stuck up here I know what would have happened. She'd have sat by that fire and grumbled. She'd have been worse than useless, but I would have known where to find her, and it wouldn't have been out there doing a Captain Oates.'

'Sorry about that.' Philippa stroked his prickly chin, tenderly, not teasing because he did look exhausted. 'You're tired,' she said, and he grinned wearily.

'I'm half dead. I've hardly closed my eyes since I got here. That bed upstairs is no use at all without you. Up there I couldn't sleep till it was daylight, and only half an hour or so then. Last night I was waiting for you to wake, and I daren't sleep.'

She moved a little way, lifting the coverings. 'Come here,' she said, pulling him down beside her and feeling the strong tired body relax with a deep sigh.

'I love you,' he mumbled.

'Go to sleep.' She cradled his head to her breast, nestled against him, holding him close, and he was asleep within seconds. He didn't know she kissed him, and she was asleep again herself a few minutes later...

Philippa was the first to wake. Kern still slept, his arms around her, hers around him, and she lay in lazy peace for a while, resisting the temptation to kiss and wake him. Instead she slithered very slowly from his embrace, and slipped from under the sheets and blankets.

She, was well again, refreshed and hungry and alive, and it was her turn to take charge for the next half hour or so. Her skirt and tights and boots were dry by the fire, and she put them on again. She daren't risk the creaking stairs to get any other clothes out of her case.

There was her jumper too; as a nurse Kern had made her more comfortable than she had made him. He was sleeping fully dressed and with his boots on, and that was going to astonish him when he did wake up.

She had never seen him exhausted before, but he would not have rested until she had woken. If she had been really ill he would have cared for her, even though he believed she had told Roy about this place, and that Roy was coming here.

He had said that Liliias would have sat beside the fire and grumbled, and so would Roy. Roy might have thought he loved Philippa, but after a couple of days up here he would have been so sorry for himself there would have been no compassion left over for anyone else. With almost anyone but Kern this isolation would have turned into a nightmare, instead of the stuff that dreams are made of.

She looked at the red head on the pillow, at the long length of sleeping man, and she had to keep her hands busy or they would have stroked the hair from the closed eyes, and then she wouldn't have been able to stop herself leaning over and kissing him. But he needed this sleep, she must let him wake in his own time, although when the meal was ready she might make a little more noise moving around.

She tiptoed now, bringing in more fuel, laying the table, opening a couple of main-meal tins and placing the saucepan very quietly on top of the fire.

Charred notebooks and washed out pages of writing were still on the dresser, but they had been dried and tidied and after the meal perhaps they could start work on them. Philippa wouldn't be bored any more, there was going to be plenty to do.

Nothing had changed outside when she opened the front door a crack to look down the mountainside. She would have been disappointed if the thaw had started and she closed the door again smiling, and Kern said, 'Thank God for that!'

'You're awake.' She fled to the stove and stirred the mixture in the saucepan vigorously. 'Is that why you're giving thanks?'

He sat up, realised he was fully dressed and swung out his booted feet with a comical expression of surprise. 'Strewth!' he exclaimed, and then, 'No, I'm thankful to see you come back in. I thought for a moment you might be off on a quick trip down to the cars to fetch my razor.'

'Not until I can see my way.' She lifted the saucepan on to the side hob. 'Not that you couldn't do with a razor!'

'You don't like my beard?' He was behind her, his hands around her waist, nuzzling the back of her neck with a chin that tickled so that she squirmed and laughed.

'I'll learn to live with it for now, so long as you promise to shave it off as soon as you can.'

'Anything you ask.' He swung her round to face him. 'Even to getting you down the mountain if that's what you want.'

'But it isn't.' Her fingers ran up and down his arm. 'I want you to eat your dinner. You've been making me eat, now it's my turn.'

He put the fireside chair at the table and then took the little vase from the mantelshelf and tipped out the three rings. Gently he placed her rings back on her finger and said huskily, 'Always stay married to me, love. X'm sorry I'm bad-tempered sometimes when I'm working.'

Everyone was short-tempered sometimes, but Philippa had been afraid of Lillas and seen everything through a distorting glass. The facets of the big diamond sparkled and it was good to have her rings back, although they were only a symbol. The bond between herself and Kern needed no symbols. It was as strong as her fight to get back to him on the mountainside, and as sure as his speed to save her.

But in answer she picked up his ring and kissed it, then put it back on his finger and said, 'You're going to let me help you with your work, aren't you?'

'Why not? You're both my worlds, the one outside and the one inside my head, so come inside, love, and we'll work together.' He smiled at her, holding her with his hands clasped behind her, 'Besides,' and his smile widened to a grin, 'you don't have a job with Wesk and Wesk any more. I told Roy Wesk what to expect if he made one more pass at my wife.'

That would make Roy reconsider his offer of shoulders to cry on. He hadn't anticipated any trouble from Kern, he had thought Kern would be glad to be rid of Philippa. That interview must have shaken him, and she bit her lip, because it would be heartless to giggle. 'Poor Roy,' she said. 'Did you threaten to sue him?'

'I threatened to murder him,' said Kern cheerfully. He was smiling now, but he had been murderously angry when he arrived here, and he must have frightened Roy half to death. Philippa said, 'You frightened me as well, but I thought you were mad because you'd come up here for peace and quiet and found me.'

She remembered the feeling of violence, the threat that his presence had seemed to generate. She said, 'When you sat there writing, that first night--'

'Trying to write,' he interrupted her. 'I didn't have my mind on it. At the time I wanted to shake you.'

'Was that all?' She laughed softly. 'Well, I was lying there thinking how lovely it would be to hit you with the poker.'

'What stopped you?'

'I thought you might hit me back.'

His hands were still clasped behind her in an embrace of protective tenderness. 'Pity you didn't,' he said. 'If we'd come to blows it would have saved a lot of time, because if I'd laid hands on you it would have been in love—even if you had just taken a swing at me with the poker. When I hold you I hold my life.'

For her too. 'Oh, my dear,' she said shakily. 'Oh, my dearest one.' She reached to draw his face down, and just before his mouth found hers she whispered, 'Doesn't rapture of the heights sound lovely?'