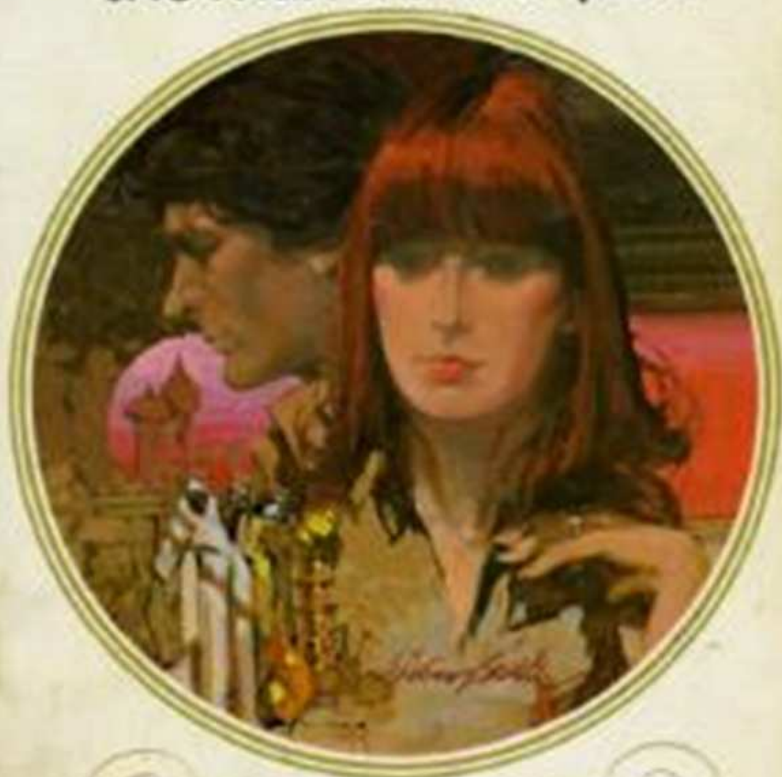


Harlequin Presents...

KAY
THORPE

the man from tripoli



THE MAN FROM TRIPOLI

Kay Thorpe

"Trust me, Lisa. It will be all right."

Lisa could have laughed. How could she trust Bryn when he had taken advantage of her from the start?

They had met outside the church where the man she loved had married Bryn's girl friend. Bryn had suggested a drink together to ease their sorrows. Lisa had recklessly agreed. Why not? It had seemed entirely appropriate that they should console each other.

But Lisa hadn't expected to end up in Libya married to Bryn. And she wasn't going to remain married to a man who didn't really love her!

CHAPTER ONE

'I pronounce that they be man and wife together,' intoned the clergyman, and Lisa momentarily closed her eyes. Too late now. It was done. She was Bryn's wife, for better or worse.

Lisa Venner. She supposed she would get used to the name in time. Hard to believe that five days ago she hadn't even know Bryn existed. Five days, yet in some ways it seemed like a lifetime. If she had possessed the strength of mind to stay away from Mark's wedding none of this would have happened. But no, she'd had to be there, proving to everyone how little he had really meant to her.

It had been simple enough to slip out of the church while the bridal couple were in the vestry and the rest of the congregation gustily singing the chosen hymn. April sunlight made her blink a little after the dimness within. Dithering on the edge of the kerb, she heard the warning blast of a horn and felt a sudden hand grab her arm, yanking her back to safety as a cab shot past with its nearside wheels almost in the gutter.

'Close,' commented her rescuer. 'Don't you ever look before you try to cross a road?'

Lisa marshalled her forces to give the man a smile and a shrug, barely registering his appearance right then. 'My mind was on other things. Thanks for pulling me back.'

'Lucky I was behind you or you'd be having a free ride.' He let her go but didn't move away, looking down at her from several inches' advantage with a certain speculation. 'I saw you in church. Friend of the bride?'

Some hidden reserve lightened her voice to insouciance. 'I *was* a friend of the groom's.'

'Coincidence.' His tone held irony. 'I'm June's ex too. Maybe we should try drowning our sorrows together.'

Lisa looked at him properly then for the first time, seeing a tall, bronzed man with crisp dark hair and angular features. Thirtyish, she guessed—and not recently domiciled in England, judging from the depth of that tan. Grey eyes returned her regard with a trace of mockery.

'Bryn Venner,' he supplied, and lifted an interrogative eyebrow.

'Lisa Jordan.' She felt impelled to add, 'It's too early for alcohol.'

'Tea, then?' he suggested. The irony deepened. 'Tea and sympathy. Sounds appropriate.'

'I don't think ...' Lisa began, and let the words trail away as she saw derision spring in his gaze.

'Planning to stay and watch them drive away?'

Pride brought a spark to green eyes. 'I hardly see any point.'

'I agree. What's done is done, so let's get on with living.' His glance appraised her. 'So how about it?'

Her hesitation was brief. The alternative held little attraction. In fact, the longer she could put off being alone with her thoughts the better, she supposed. That this Bryn Venner obviously took her at face value was a tribute to her acting ability. 'All right,' she said. 'Tea it is.'

'Good.' He took her arm again to turn her back towards the roadway, eyes scanning the oncoming traffic. 'We can make it after this next car.'

She was conscious of lean muscularity beneath the well-cut grey suit as they crossed the road together; of the firm pressure of his fingers under her elbow. Hardly the type of man she would have associated with the pert little blonde Mark had just married. Much as she hated to admit it, they had looked well matched with their almost identical colouring and equal share of good looks. This Bryn Venner's features were too uncompromisingly masculine to be handsome, his mouth and jaw cut along lines which suggested a strong will. No, not June's type at all. Nor hers either, for that matter. Too old and too worldly. Oh, Mark, she thought aching.

He flagged down a taxi as they reached the opposite kerb, told the driver to take them to the Savoy and followed her into the back to settle himself at her side with a faint smile.

'If we're going to do it, let's do it in style. If we stretch it out long enough we can move on from there for some stronger consolation.'

Common sense kept Lisa from coming back with a sharp rejoinder. She had accepted an invitation to tea, nothing more than that. Once it was over all she had to do was walk away. To what? asked a small voice at the back of her mind.

'You don't live in England do you?' she said for want of anything better.

He shook his head. 'Libya at present. Oil,' he added, anticipating the next question. He took out cigarettes, lighting one for himself when she refused. 'How about you? Do you live in London?'

'Yes.' With some reluctance she tagged on, 'I worked for Wrexhams.'

'I see.' From the tone of his voice he saw too well. 'That's how you met Williams?'

Her smile felt brittle. 'Found and lost. I suppose the chairman's daughter has to be a better catch than an office secretary.'

'Ambitious, is he.' It was a statement, not a question.

'I don't suppose any more than most.' Lisa already re-gretted the snide remark. 'I wasn't implying that he doesn't love her. The two can go together.'

'Not if one isn't to get in the way of the other,' dryly. 'Still, she's probably better off with him than she might have been with me in Tripoli. It's not exactly the kind of scene she's used to.'

'Rough?' she asked.

He shrugged. 'Not so far as living conditions go. We've . a sizeable community of Europeans working for Unilibya out there. Mostly married. The Company prefers a family man—less likely to go off the rails.'

Lisa kept her eyes front. 'Is that the only reason you asked June Wrexham to marry you?'

'I never got round to asking her,' he returned equably. 'The wedding was all arranged when I came on leave three weeks ago. She was on the verge of writing to tell me about it.'

'She might have changed her mind if she'd known why you'd come back.'

Bryn laughed. 'I doubt it. She's pie-eyed about that ex- boy-friend of yours. Anyway, it wasn't that important. As wives go, June wouldn't have been too bad, but I wasn't desperate enough to put up a fight.'

Lisa said caustically, 'It seems to me it wasn't a wife you wanted so much as to pay lip service to Company rules.'

'Preferences, not rules. And don't you believe it.' The grey eyes were sardonic. 'A man needs a woman of his own out there. The nights can get pretty chilly.'

She met his glance and looked hastily away again, wondering if he were really as hard and calculating as he was making out. 'I'd say June had a lucky escape.'

'Maybe you're right. On the other hand, I doubt if she's getting a much better deal from a climber like Williams.' He caught her change of expression and smiled. 'Come on, you said it yourself. Opportunity knocked and he took full advantage of it. Good thing you weren't too deeply involved.'

Her throat felt tight. 'What makes you so sure I wasn't?'

'Your attitude. I'd say your pride has taken the biggest blow. Right?'

'If you say so.' Not for anything was she going to let him guess the true state of her emotions. Let him think them two of a kind. They weren't going to be together long enough for it to matter. She added coolly, 'How long does this job in Libya last?'

'It's permanent if I want it to be. Options every three years. I've done almost a year.'

'And if you decide not to take up the option?'

'Depends what comes up. Unital are developing new fields in other parts of the world.'

'But a man's family would be expected to pack up and follow him wherever he went?'

'If facilities were available. Takes time to establish a set-up suitable for women and children. Sometimes it's necessary for wives to stay home in England for a period.'

'It all seems rather one-sided,' she commented.

'There are compensations.' He sounded amused. 'What you really mean is you couldn't have seen June settling for that kind of life regardless.'

'I don't know her personally, so I can't say what she might have settled for.' Lisa kept her tone carefully neutral. 'She seems to like a good time, but appearances can be deceptive.'

'They can?' He slid a deliberate glance over her, from the smooth auburn upsweep of her hair about finely boned features, down to the slim length of her legs outlined by the soft silk skirt of her dress. 'Do *you* like a good time too?'

She laughed, determined not to let him see how his appraisal had affected her. 'Anything wrong in that?'

'Nothing at all. Right now I think it's something we could both use.'

There was no time to reply to that because they were drawing up outside the hotel. Lisa wasn't sure a reply was even called for; it had been an observation rather than an invitation. Nevertheless, the suggestion was implicit: they were two people drawn together by a common loss—at least, that was the way he obviously saw it. Right now she regretted agreeing to accompany him at all.

It was the first time she had ever been inside the Savoy, and she was not overly impressed now as they entered the foyer by way of the revolving doors. It was only on second glance that one became aware of the timeless atmosphere of the place, the quiet dignity of the decor. Restrained grandeur was the phrase which sprang to mind.

Tea was not apparently normally served in the lounge area, but Bryn's request for it elicited compliance regardless. It was all in the manner of approach, Lisa gathered as the waiter departed to secure the order. No 'Can we' but a firm 'We would like'. Here was a man accustomed to having things his way, and it showed.

Tea, when it came, was served from bone china and accompanied by starched napkins large enough to cover the most ample lap. Pouring from the delicately fluted pot, Lisa felt like a duchess.

Bryn watched her with a hint of a smile about his lips. 'To the manner born,' he said. 'Do you see yourself living in this' style?'

She laughed and shook her head. 'I'd have a strong urge to stand up and shout "fire" or something just to see if it quickened up the pace!'

'It can be quick enough where it's necessary.'

She glanced at him. 'Are you staying here?'

'Not this trip, I couldn't get in. London is chock-full of tourists.'

'This time of year it usually is. Anyway,' she added with a touch of acidity, 'you're a visitor yourself.'

'Not the gaping kind. There must be millions of cameras to the square mile.'

'I'm surprised you stayed as long, considering.'

'I haven't spent the whole three weeks in town,' he came back easily. 'I made a few trips here and there; one down to the West Country to look up old friends.'

'How much longer do you have?'

'Five days. I'm booked on next Monday's early evening flight out of Heathrow.'

'You sound as if you'll be glad to get back.'

'I shall.'

'Even without a woman of your own?'

The strong mouth widened briefly. 'Guess I'll just have to borrow someone else's.'

'That wouldn't surprise me.'

'It wouldn't?' He was openly mocking her. 'That's rare insight into character you've got. Tell me more.'

'Why bother? You'd only believe as much of it as you wanted to believe.'

'Bright!' he applauded. This time the smile was genuine —and unexpectedly attractive. 'You're just what the doctor ordered, Lisa Jordan. What are you doing for dinner?'

'I'm going home,' she said.

'To sit licking your wounds all night? Hardly your .style. You need taking out of yourself. So do I, if it comes to that.'

She looked at him for a long moment, struck by an underlying note in his voice. She was putting on an act herself; there was every chance he might be doing the same. If he was she could sympathise with the way he must be feeling right now. He returned her regard unflinchingly yet with a subtle difference in expression. 'I'd like to spend the evening with you, Lisa,' he said. 'It could be good for both of us.'

'All right.' The acceptance was out before she was fully aware of having reached a decision. Having made it, however, she could hardly retract. She found a smile and used it lightly. 'Like you said, it could be what we both need.'

He began talking casually after that, probing her interests the way any new acquaintance might. Surprisingly she found herself beginning to relax with him, to emerge from the slough of depression into which she had tended to sink these last weeks. They were in the same boat regardless of circumstances, needing the same stimuli to get them through a difficult evening. Infinitely better than being alone, she decided. Anything was.

When he suggested they adjourn for the initially proffered drink she could scarcely believe it was already approaching six o'clock. Before they left she went to the cloakroom, viewing her face through the subtly lit mirrors with a feeling she was looking at a stranger. Amazing what a difference a little extra make-up and an upswept hairstyle could make to her appearance. She both looked and felt older, more able to cope.

But that had been the intention, hadn't it? No vulnerable little-girl-lost impression to be left on the minds of those who had seen her at the wedding. She was changing her job because she was bored with it, just as she had altered her appearance because she was bored with that; no reason why they shouldn't believe it, even those who had known about her and Mark. Anyway, it was all behind her now. Officially she had left Wrexhams last Friday. Almost two weeks of her holiday dues to go, then a new job and a new life.

She was going to forget Mark. She had to forget him. He was married to June now and out of her reach for ever. Tonight forgetfulness lay with the man who waited for her outside, a man she would probably never even see again. So make the most of it, she told herself wryly. Tomorrow you're on your own.

She came awake slowly, her mind fogged, her head aching. The bed felt unfamiliar, harder somehow—and wider. She was lying on her face with the pillow bunched up beneath it. Making a supreme effort she rolled over, putting up a hand to shield her eyes from the light as pain lanced through her head again.

Fragments of thought skittered around in her brain, coming together with reluctance and making little sense. There had been some kind of party, she remembered vaguely. A lot of people—a lot of noise. A face swam through the jumble,» elusively familiar. It took her a moment to realise she was seeing it with her eyes, not her mind, and that it belonged to the man seated in a chair across the room, legs stretched out in front of him. He was holding a cigarette in his fingers, smoke wreathing away from the tip. From the look of the ashtray resting on the arm of the chair at his elbow, it was by no means his first.

'Feeling better?' he asked quietly.

Recognition jerked through her along with a sudden sense of panic as she met the steady grey eyes. Memory was returning piece by piece, none of it reassuring: dancing close wrapped in a pair of strong arms; laughing up into a lean, bronzed face; sparkling bubbles from the champagne going up her nose.

Lots of champagne, she recalled. Too much. There was a vague recollection of getting into a car and being driven through the night streets, of an arm about her holding her steady in a lift, of a room and a man who had towered over her, smiling as he took her in his arms. This room. This man.

Oh God, she thought desperately, don't let it be true!

The cotton sheet felt smooth against her skin. She made a small sound in her throat, pushing the back of her hand against her mouth as she rolled her face into the pillow again.

Bryn made no move to get up. Tone expressionless, he asked, 'Just how old are you, Lisa?'

'Twenty.' Her voice was muffled by the pillow.

The exclamation came soft. 'You looked and acted older yesterday.'

'I was trying to be older.' She couldn't for the life of her turn back towards him; couldn't look him in the face. 'But not... like this.'

His sigh only barely reached her ears. 'I'm not making any excuses. I needed a woman last night, but if I'd known it was the first time for you I'd have taken you right home and made sure you got into your own bed.' He paused. 'Where is home, by the way? Is anyone likely to be worried about you?'

'I have a bed-sitter in Putney.' She had to force the words out. 'No one is likely to have missed me.'

'That's something—gives us breathing space. I seem to remember you mentioning your parents were divorced.'

'Yes.'

'Do they live in this part of the country?'

'Mother doesn't. She married an American and went to the States with him. Dad lives in Surrey.'

'He remarried too?'

'Yes.'

'So you don't see much of them.'

'No.' Her throat ached from holding back the tears. It was too late for crying—about anything. She couldn't think why he was asking all the questions. No amount of breathing space could alter the fact.

It was a moment or two before he spoke again. 'I think you'd feel better if you were up and dressed,' he said, and got to his feet. 'Come on down to the foyer when you're ready and we'll find a quiet corner to talk.'

Her head lifted a little, the action sending a wave of nausea through her. 'Where is this?'

'My hotel. It's a large one, and very impersonal, so nobody is going to know which room you're from.' He moved towards the door, footsteps deadened by the carpeting. 'And I'll be watching the lifts,' he added, 'so don't try running away. It's got to be faced, for both of us.'

What did *he* have to face? she thought as the door closed behind him. Hers was the loss. Had it been Mark she had • just spent the night with she could have found some mitigation for herself because she loved him, but Bryn was to all intents and purposes a stranger—a man she had met for the first time yesterday afternoon. There was no excuse at all.

She made herself throw back the covers and get out of bed, fighting the nausea which threatened to overtake her. It was the first time in her life she had ever been more than mildly merry, and it would be the last, she vowed. Too late, a voice mocked in her ear. Once was all it took.

There was a bathroom adjoining. Lisa looked at her reflection in the mirror which practically covered one wall, and shuddered. She was a mess, the mascara she had so liberally applied the day before

smudged around her eyes like a panda in reverse colouring. Her hair was wild and tangled and needed the attention of a brush.

The way she had behaved yesterday she deserved to have the back of one applied somewhere else, she thought in hot sweeping shame. Bryn could scarcely be blamed for taking her at face value. She pressed her fingers to her temples, trying to still the ache long enough to remember more clearly. Yet did she really want to remember the details? Weren't the vague disturbing impressions left on her mind already more than enough? There was no getting away from fact. She had allowed the man waiting for her now downstairs to make love to her. Love? Her throat contracted. How could it be called that? There had been no emotion involved.

The warm shower served to revive her in body if not in spirit. The things she had worn yesterday had to suffice for the time being, although she hated putting them on again. New or not, she would get rid of this dress the moment she got home, she resolved, and wanted to crumple all over again at the thought of the horribly lonely little room waiting for her. It had been bad enough this last few weeks with no Mark to take her out of it; what would it be like now with this on her mind through the long evenings?

There was a lipstick and compact in her purse, but she ignored both, combing her hair down to hang freely about her shoulders. Did it matter what she looked like? She had made enough of an impression on the man downstairs already.

What they had to talk about she couldn't begin to think. Obviously he felt guilty over what had happened, although he needn't because she was prepared to take all the blame. Given the kind of encouragement she must have handed out, she supposed few men would turn their backs— especially when they themselves were in need of consolation. She had longed so much for Mark last night, and had drunk more than she should to try to forget. Somewhere along the line

the two urges must have merged. None of which was adequate excuse.

She averted her eyes from the rumpled bed when she went back into the main room to pick up her jacket. She was glad to close the outer door on it, wishing she could do the same on her emotions. Mark's marriage was something she could learn to live with, given time. This too she was going to have to live with, but she would never forgive herself. Never!

She was on the fifth floor, she saw from the room numbers. The lifts lay along the corridor through a pair of fire- doors. It seemed to take an age for one to answer her call, the elderly couple already occupying the cage assuming the faintly indignant look common to those stopped short of the floor they themselves have requested.

There was no attendant. Lisa stepped inside and pressed the button for the ground floor with faster beating heart. If Bryn Venner was not in sight she would simply walk out of the hotel and out of his life for ever. She didn't want to see him again. How did she face him? She felt cheap and degraded."

With sinking resignation she saw him sitting in a chair directly facing the lifts as the door slid open. Even then she attempted to ignore him, making to the right where the street doors beckoned.

Without appearing to hurry, he got to his feet and moved to intercept her, taking her by the elbow and steering her lightly across in the direction of the Buttery.

'We'll talk over breakfast,' he said. 'You need something in your stomach.'

'I couldn't,' she protested miserably. 'Please, I...'

'Coffee, then.' He was brooking no refusals, that was apparent both from his manner and the firmness of his grasp on her arm.

He asked for and was granted a window table at the far end of the room which afforded some measure of privacy. He ordered Continental for them both, sitting without speaking until the waitress had finished serving them and departed, then taking up the coffee pot himself to fill her cup.

'Drink that,' he said. 'And at least nibble some toast. I've suffered enough hangovers in my time to have a very good idea how you're feeling right now.' His smile was faint. 'It does help.'

Nothing could make her feel any worse, Lisa conceded. She obeyed gingerly, stomach lurching dangerously at the first sip of black coffee but gradually settling down. The toast she left dry, unable to face even the thought of butter. She had to meet the grey eyes eventually. They compelled her to do so.

'If you set out to underline it,' he said on a rueful note, 'you certainly succeeded.' He watched her brows draw together and forestalled the question. 'My lack of judgment. You look about seventeen right now.'

'That still makes me over the age of consent,' she retorted, 'so you don't have to worry!' She felt herself flush before his steady regard, tagged on low-toned, 'I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. I'm not blaming you for what happened. I know I must have given you the impression that I ...' Her voice petered out.

'I blame myself,' he said. 'I should have known.' The pause stretched. 'You said you were due to start a new job fairly soon. When?'

'Monday week. I'm taking my holidays now as part of my notice to save having to ask for them later.' And to save having to face colleagues after the wedding as well as before, she could have added.

Sympathy, no matter how well meant, was the last thing she had wanted.

'So at present you've no special commitments.' There was an odd insistent note in his voice. 'Do you have a valid passport?'

Surprise brought her head up again. 'Why?'

'Do you?'

'Yes, but...'

'That makes things simpler.'

'I don't understand.' Lisa stared at him in bewilderment. 'What does my having a passport have to do with anything?'

'It saves all the red tape involved in trying to hurry one through.' The lean features were controlled. 'I think I told you I have to be back in Tripoli by next Tuesday. That just gives us time.'

The headaches was still bringing pressure to bear behind her eyes. She said heavily, 'For what?'

'To get married.'

The voices of the other breakfasters seemed to recede a long way off. Lisa felt suspended, her body weightless, her mind gone blank.

'Married?' she repeated.

'It's the only way of handling this.' Broad shoulders lifted at the expression dawning slowly in her eyes. 'I have to be on that plane on Monday, and I can't just walk out and forget it. Not in this case. Looked at realistically, it's not all that bad an idea. You don't seem to have anything much to stay here for.'

Somehow she found her voice. 'We're total strangers,' she got out. 'How can two people who don't even know one another ...'

His lips twisted. 'I wouldn't say that exactly.' He watched the colour burn in her cheeks and added levelly, 'Plenty of marriages get off to a worse start. You can hardly say you're physically turned off by me.' -

Her teeth clenched till they hurt. 'I don't remember very much about last night,' she said. 'It's just... a blur.'

'All of it?' 'Yes.'

His smile was brief. 'At least I don't have that complication. You'll just have to take my word for it.'

'I can't marry you,' she said desperately. 'It's ... impossible !'

'And I can't just leave you.' His eyes held hers. 'Supposing you're pregnant?'

Her flush returned and faded again as quickly, leaving her pale. 'I hadn't thought of that,' she confessed in a small voice.

'It wasn't a night for thinking,' he agreed on a dry note. 'These days I suppose a man subconsciously takes it for granted that it's all taken care of.'

'It doesn't have to happen.'

'Doesn't have to, no, but there's more than reasonable chance. Anyway, it's a risk I'm not prepared to take.'

'*You're* not prepared to take!' Her voice was low but impassioned. 'Don't I have any say in it?'

'You'd rather become a possible statistic—one more for the files?'

'You're only surmising.'

'With good cause.' He shook his head, mouth firm. 'I'd spend the rest of my life wondering. I'm not in the habit of leaving my progeny dotted around the world.'

'But supposing I'm not,' she said on a note of desperation.

'It won't make any difference if we're married.' He paused, added quickly, 'I want to marry you, Lisa.'

She made herself say it. 'Just because you were the first man to make love to me?'

'That comes into it. There are other reasons.'

'Oh yes, the Company! They're expecting you back with a wife in tow, aren't they?'

He ignored the sarcasm. 'I gave nobody a reason for taking this leave. One or two might know I've been corresponding with a girl in England, but that's all. So far as they'll be concerned, you could be that girl.'

'But I'm not,' she said. 'And I don't want to be!' She could feel her hands trembling as she clasped them tightly together in her lap. 'Bryn, it wouldn't work. You have to see that. No marriage can succeed on those terms!'

'You mean without love?' He shook his head, mouth cynical. 'In the East that's regarded as the least requirement —to start with at any rate. Arranged marriages have been proved to be among the most successful because the feeling grows through proximity. Who's to say ours wouldn't develop?'

She said thickly, 'You seem to have it all worked out.'

'I sat for a couple of hours thinking about it before you woke up. It makes sense.' He studied her. 'What were you intending to do with your life, anyway? You're between jobs, and pining for a man you can't have. You probably deluded yourself into believing I was Mark last night. Either that, or it was a subconscious attempt to prove to yourself that you didn't really care any more.'

'I want to go home.' Her voice shook a little.

'A bed-sitter in Putney? That's no home. I'm eleven years older than you, Lisa. I've had time and opportunity to gain a position in life where I can provide you with a proper one.'

'In Libya?'

'To start with. I've twenty-four months of this contract still to run. By then we'd be in a position to plan further.'

She looked at him helplessly, unable to make herself believe this wasn't some nightmare she was having. To marry a man she barely knew seemed inconceivable, yet she was forced to acknowledge a deep-down fear of the possible alternative. She supposed she should be grateful for small mercies; not every man would be prepared to offer as much for one night's doubtful pleasure. That would be part of the bargain too, of course. He would hardly anticipate a celibate relationship. Without volition her eyes dropped to his hands, long and lean-fingered, the backs tanned deep brown by years of strong sunlight. A tremor ran through her at the thought of those hands on her body—knowledgable, experienced. She knew the feel of them even though her mind refused to release the memory.

'Trust me, Lisa,' he said quietly. 'It's going to be all right.'

The gold band still felt strange and alien on her finger when they got into the waiting car outside the hotel where the wedding luncheon had taken place. Waving goodbye from the pavement alongside his second wife, her father looked more relieved than anything, she thought without emotion. Giving her away had proved something of an embarrassment to him, but there had been no one else she could ask. They had never been very close even at the best of times, and in the two years since his remarriage she had seen him only a few times. He had a young son through Marie now whom he idolised. If Lisa had been a boy herself they might have got along better in the past. Not that it mattered any more. She had a new life of her own to lead.

It had been her insistence that they have a church wedding, although she had steered clear of white for her dress. Bryn had roped in an old acquaintance as best man, weathering the obvious curiosity without apparent strain. At lunch, he had carried the conversation easily and amusingly, prompting Marie to remark to Lisa later in the cloakroom where she was changing her clothes that she was a lucky girl to have found a man like Bryn.

'It's a real weight off your father's mind knowing you'll be so well taken care of,' she said in the rather stilted tone she always used with her stepdaughter. 'Does your mother know you're getting married today?'

'I sent her a cable,' Lisa said without expression. 'I daresay she'll write to me in Tripoli once I let her have the address.'

'You must let us know how you're going on too.' The words sounded hollow. 'That's a nice little suit, dear. Better for travelling than the dress, I agree. You could have saved yourself the double expense, if it comes to that. Not that you need to worry too much about money with an oil executive for a husband. I gather he's a top man out there.'

The top man looked round at her as they drew out into the main stream of traffic, eyes assessing. 'You've hardly spoken this last hour,' he said. 'Things can't be that bad.'

Lisa forced a smile. 'I'm tired,' she said. 'It's been a hectic five days.'

'And the flight isn't going to help.' His tone was rueful. 'Sorry it couldn't be any different.'

'I don't mind,' she hastened to assure him. 'I can sleep on the plane. What time do we get to Tripoli?'

'The early hours. It's a fair drive from the airport, but once we get to the house you can go straight to bed and catch up on what you've missed.'

She wondered if the irony was intentional. There was no telling from his expression. Even after five days she was no closer to knowing this man she had married. Not in any way that counted. So far he hadn't even kissed her with any degree of passion, just a light touch on the lips or the temple when saying goodnight. The situation seemed ludicrous on the face of it, yet could she have borne it any other way? Their whole relationship held such a precarious balance.

Know him or not, she had found things in him she liked on the surface. He could make her laugh when he wanted to, draw her into interesting discussion on the most unlikely subjects, stimulate her mind in a way no one else had ever done. It wasn't going to be so bad. Where they were going made things easier. Apart from themselves, no one need know that all was not perfectly normal between them. And who could tell what the future might hold?

CHAPTER TWO

It was still dark when they landed, the deep throbbing darkness of the East overlaid with spice. Travel-weary, Lisa took in little of her surroundings as the big white car bore them away from the airport towards the city twenty- seven kilometres away. Their destination lay on the outskirts to the west, Bryn had said when they were coming in. They would have no need to go through the town itself.

The road surprised her in its smoothness. After a few minutes she fell asleep, head lolling sideways into the wedge between seat back and door frame.

Not surprisingly she had a stiff neck by the time Bryn aroused her on arrival at their destination. Rubbing it, she got out of the car to stand in a paved courtyard looking at the two-storied, colourwashed building which was to be her home for the next two years. There were fretted stone grilles at the lower windows, above which the walls jutted into a covered balcony running right round the house. Bougainvillea climbed the pillars flanking the studded door, and ran riot over the rough stone walls cutting off the house from the street outside.

A figure appeared round the side of the building, running across to close the double iron gates with a sound that sent a sudden small shiver down Lisa's spine. The man was dressed in a loose flowing garment of indeterminate colour, his face, thin and dark, grinning above it. He addressed Bryn in what Lisa took to be Arabic, the words totally incomprehensible to her ear.

'Speak English,' said Bryn, cutting into the flow of words with a grin of his own. To Lisa he added, 'This is Mukhtal. He and his wife Hawa look after the place between them.'

'You like to have breakfast now?' asked the Libyan, giving his new mistress another of the wide beams.

Bryn shook his head. 'Just bring in the luggage. We'll eat later. Right now we both need some sleep.'

He led the way indoors to a large square hallway tiled in black and white underfoot. Lisa had a vague impression of arches and doors leading off it to other regions as they crossed to the staircase angling up from one corner. The balustrade was carved in wood, ornate yet smooth to the touch. All the walls were plain white plaster hung with tapestries and copper work.

At the top a corridor ran straight through the house - with doors either side. Bryn opened the first one on the right and ushered her inside. There were twin beds, she saw, both draped in identical cotton lace spreads. The rest of the furnishings were heavy with carving and inlaid work. Once again the floor was tiled, with a couple of rugs to take away the bareness.

'The bathroom is next door,' said Bryn, tossing his flight bag on to the nearest of the two beds. He ran a hand through his hair and pulled his tie loose with the other, sliding it out from under the collar of his shirt. 'Have you got all you need in your bag there, or do you have to open your cases up?'

'I can manage, thanks.' Her voice sounded small and faraway and her chest felt tight. This was her wedding night, "yet she had never felt more depressed and miserable. Everything was so strange—especially the knowledge that she was married to this man so casually undressing. She wished desperately to be back home in England among the old and" the familiar. How could she ever become accustomed to living with Bryn this way, to sharing the intimacies which as an only child she had never shared with anyone before? There was so much more to being married than she had let

herself think about. Deliberately, she realised now. Most people had some basis to start out on— some familiarity, no matter how slight, with each other's ways. She had slept with Bryn already, yet it didn't help. In fact it made things worse.

She turned abruptly and went to find the bathroom, aware of his eyes swinging to follow her.

She had to go back to the room eventually, of course. He was standing out on the balcony when she did so, elbows resting on the parapet as he looked out over the scattered rooftops towards the sea. There was a sliding screen over the doorway to stop any insect life entering the room. Through it she could see he was wearing only the lower half of a pair of pyjamas, his shoulders outlined broad and strong against the night sky.

He turned when he heard her, standing there for a brief moment looking in at her before sliding the screen to come back indoors. A muscle moved near the corner of his mouth as he slid a glance over the demure cotton nightdress, his eyes coming back to her face with a faint glint of impatience.

'For God's sake stop acting like a martyr about to be sacrificed!' he snapped. 'I don't expect you to honour any vows tonight. It's been a long day and we're both tired. Forget it.'

She made no move to stop him as he moved on past her, the lump in her throat too hard to swallow on. He might have made some attempt to understand her feelings, she thought painfully, and knew even then that it was impossible for him to do so. He was a man, and men viewed things so differently. So far as Bryn was concerned the ice had already been broken that night in his hotel room.

She was lying motionless on her side in the bed nearest the window when he came back into the room, face turned away from the door.

He turned off the bedside lamps from the switch on the wall and Lisa heard the other mattress springs creak a little as his weight descended on them. Silence grew in the room, weightier than the cicadas sounding off in the night outside. Bryn was the first to break it, voice gentler than she had hoped for.

'You know, even if you could remember it, the first time is never all that good for a girl. If we'd had the opportunity I'd have taken you somewhere we could have got to know one another a bit better before coming on here, but we didn't, and we're going to have to make the best of things the way they are. Just get some sleep. It will work out.'

The sun was high and bright when Lisa eventually awoke from a sleep which had held a quality of exhaustion. She lay quietly for a moment staring at the unadorned white ceiling before slowly turning her head to look at the other bed. It was empty, the covers thrown back. On the far side of it she could see the tops of their three suitcases standing on edge waiting to be unpacked.

Sitting up, she pushed back her hair from her face with an unsteady hand, wondering what time it was. Her watch was on the low chest of drawers fitted between the two beds. Reaching for it, she gave a small gasp of dismay. Half past ten already! Why on earth hadn't Bryn woken her?

Seen by daylight, the bedroom took on new dimensions, the seeming heaviness softened by the colours of the tiles on the floor and the gleaming blue fabric of the wall-to-wall curtaining. She slid back the screen and went out on to the balcony, feeling the heat hit her like something 'tangible. The villa was one of several similar ones all set within their own walled grounds, she saw from the parapet, the ground gradually falling away towards the sparkling blue line of the sea fronted by a strip of golden sand.

Her spirits lifted a little as she sniffed the aromatic air and felt the warmth on her skin. After three days of almost continuous rain back home in England the sun felt heavenly, although she could imagine one would have to be careful not to over-expose too soon. She sobered again at the thought of what she had left behind her. This was home now, at least for the next two years.

There was sound in plenty outside, but the villa was quiet as the grave. Lisa opened up one of her cases and extracted a pair of cotton slacks and a matching shirt in pale lemon, along with a pair of flat-heeled mules. The bathroom was tiled in white and more than adequately equipped. After her shower she towelled herself quickly dry and got dressed, then ran a brush over her hair and put on a dab of lipstick, aware of the perspiration already faintly dewing her temples again despite the air-conditioning. She turned the latter up a point, grateful for the immediate response. Bryn had been right about living conditions.

Company employees apparently enjoyed all the refinements.

Mukhtal came out through one of the doors as she descended to the hall. He was dressed today in dark trousers and a white shirt, and looked somewhat older than she had taken him for last night. He paused when he saw her, mouth widening into the gap-toothed grin.

'Saida like breakfast now?'

'Just coffee and toast,' she said, and hesitated before adding, 'Is Mr Venner outside?'

'Sidi Venner gone to offices,' the Arab replied cheerfully. 'He say for you to wait here till he come back.'

She was hardly going to start wandering round a strange city on her own, Lisa thought a little caustically. Where else would she wait? She thanked the man, and moved on through the nearest archway into a

roomy salon furnished with low tables and wide, raised divans. The black and white floor tiling was extended through here too, scattered with thick piled rugs in purple and rust. There were brightly coloured hangings decorated with geotaetric motifs on some of the walls. Marquetry adorned much of the furniture.

Through a further arch lay the smaller dining salon, this in turn giving on to a patio and garden thick with white oleander and cypress. Lisa went out and stood beside the inset swimming pool, tempted by the lapping coolness of the water. She had a bikini in her suitcase upstairs. It would only take a moment or two to fetch it.

The sound of a car turning into the front courtyard cancelled out that idea for the present. Conscious of relief that Bryn had returned so early, she took a path round the side of the villa, the latter emotion undergoing a change to some slight consternation when she saw the other man standing with him.

'I thought you might not be down yet,' Bryn greeted her. 'Come and say hallo to Dan Anders.'

There was surprise in the other's eyes as he held out his hand. He was a few years younger than Bryn, almost as tall but much finer in build. His features were open and friendly.

'Mukhtal's been babbling for days about an addition to the household,' he said, 'but nobody really believed him. Welcome to Tripoli, Lisa. If this man of yours had let us know he was bringing you back with him we'd have arranged a proper celebration!'

'Not at two o'clock in the morning,' Bryn returned dryly. 'Afraid something's cropped up, honey. Dan and I are on our way down to Serdeles—trouble on one of the rigs. Rotten luck, but it can't be helped.'

Lisa bit back the protest which sprang to her lips, aware of Dan Anders' presence. 'How long will you be gone?' she managed to get out with creditable control.

'A couple of days. Shouldn't be any more.'

It took every ounce of will power she possessed to stop herself from screaming abuse at him for doing this to her now of all times when everything was so strange and new. Get to know one another better, he had said. How on earth were they supposed to do that under circumstances like these?

Dan was watching her with admiration. 'I wish my wife had your fortitude,' he said. 'She's going to raise the roof when *I* spring this on *her*!' He grinned boyishly. 'At least the news will take the edge off it. You don't need worry about being lonely these next two days. The girls will be over like a shot once it gets round.'

Lisa tried to smile, 'You mean all the other ... wives?'

'That's right. They use the pool quite a lot anyway, Bryn's place being the only Company house with one. The beach can get too hot for the smaller kids this time of year.'

'Do you all have children?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'Pam and I have only been married a few months ourselves. She came out here with me to start. The Mallinsons, the Beavers and the O'Rourkes all have two apiece. They're the only ones you're likely to be having much to do with—kids, I mean. You and Bryn will redress the balance a bit in our immediate circle. Pam could use some conversation which doesn't leave her feeling out in the cold.' His laugh robbed the remark of any sting.

Bryn stirred impatiently, glancing at his watch. 'We're going to have to get moving. Want to come in and wait while I sling my things

together? It shouldn't take more than a few minutes at the most.' Dan shook his head. 'I'll wait out here in the car.'

'Right.' Grey eyes swung back to Lisa, expression veiled. 'Come on up and help me pack.'

She accompanied him indoors in dull acquiescence, standing by helplessly once they reached the bedroom to watch him empty out yesterday's flight bag and start refilling it with bare necessities for a forty-eight-hour stay.

'Why does it need two of you to go?' she found herself demanding suddenly. 'Couldn't Dan Anders have taken care of it himself?'

The answer was short. 'No, he couldn't. This is my pigeon. I'm only taking Dan in case I need to leave somebody down there for a while.'

'Shall you be telling his wife that?'

'What Dan tells Pam is entirely up to him.' His tone was cool. He looked up and met her eyes, gave a faint sigh and ran his fingers through his hair in the gesture she was fast coming to learn bespoke intolerance. 'Look, Lisa, I know it's a lousy time for this to happen, but it's part of the job. I'll be back by Thursday and we'll have the weekend together.'

'Big deal.' She didn't even attempt to keep the bitterness down. 'A whole weekend! Are you sure they can spare you?'

He hardened visibly, mouth thinning. 'Cut out the sarcasm, I'm not in the mood to take it. Do you think I'd have planned it like this given a choice? You're not the only one who just got married.'

She flushed hotly, biting her lip, conscious of cynicism in the grey eyes as he watched her face. 'That wasn't what I meant.'

'I know damned well it wasn't what you meant. You made it pretty obvious last night that you're dreading the moment I start thinking along those lines again. That's something else we're going to have to sort out when I get back. One thing I'm not cut out for is a celibate marriage!'

'You didn't have to marry me!' she flared in sudden white-hot anger. 'Nobody held a gun to your head!'

'Not physically maybe.'

'Oh, you mean it was a moral obligation? Your code of ethics forced you to the altar!' She was past caring what she said. 'Bully for you!'

Bryn dropped the item he was holding and reached for her, hand like a vice on her wrist as he dragged her bodily towards him on her knees across the bed. His mouth was ruthless, forcing her lips apart, the weight of his arms crushing her breasts against his chest until she couldn't breathe. Then as suddenly he let her go, pushing her away so that she fell back on the cover.

'Is that how you'd prefer it?' he said roughly. 'Because you keep up that line and it's what you're likely to get! Sure I felt a moral obligation. We already went into the reasons why.' He looked down at her lying there still and white-faced and the anger faded, his mouth taking on a wry twist. Sitting down beside her, he took her chin in his hand and turned her face to him, holding her gently now. 'Lisa, don't keep throwing it at me. I already made one error of judgment, I don't want to make another. This two days could be a good thing in a way. It will give you time to adjust.'

She stared at him without moving, eyes dark. She wanted to say something that would put things right between them, but the words wouldn't come. -After a moment Bryn shrugged tautly and released

her, standing up to go back to his packing. She was still lying there when he finished, unable to find the will to get up and go to him.

'So stay there and sulk,' he clipped. 'Only get it out of your system before I get back because it cuts no ice with me. There are enough kids round here without adding to them overnight.'

'I'm not sulking.' She came up on one elbow, forcing herself to make the effort to reach him, voice low and husky. 'Bryn, don't let's part like this. I'm sorry for not being the kind of wife you'd have preferred.'

He said something under his breath and swung the flight bag up off the bed, expression unrelenting. 'My preferences have nothing to do with it. I'd better get going before Dan comes looking for me. We'll talk about it when I get back.'

As the door he paused. 'Incidentally, I told Dan we were married soon after I reached England, so we can count the honeymoon as over.'

Lisa sat numbly as he went out of the room. She heard his footsteps going down the stairs, the opening and closing of the outer door, and then after another moment or two the sound of the car engine starting up, moving out of the courtyard and down the narrow roadway until it finally merged with the other sounds filtering through the screens. No tears came. She didn't think she would ever cry again— this went beyond that kind of relief.

Pam Anders turned up less than an hour later driving a Renault with a battered front wing. She was in her early twenties, and slender almost to the point of skinniness, yet with a zest for living in her big hazel eyes and impish face which drew Lisa out of her despondency despite herself.

'I couldn't believe it when Bryn told me the news!' she exclaimed. 'If ever there was a confirmed bachelor I'd have said he was it! It just

goes to show there's not one of them immune to our charms once we put our minds to it.' The grin was infectious. 'Dan thinks *he* caught *me*. Little does he know how hard I practised running on the spot! '

Lisa had to laugh. It was impossible not to respond to someone like Pam. 'I like your husband, what little I saw of him.'

'Yes, trust something like this to crop up at just the wrong time!' The tiptilted nose wrinkled ruefully. 'Worse for you, of course. You're practically still on your honeymoon !'

'I suppose everybody has to come down to earth some time.' Lisa schooled her voice to lightness. 'Dan said I shouldn't be lonely.'

'Hardly likely. Once I let the others know they'll be over here in droves!' She indicated the telephone extension on a table in the far corner. 'Mind if I do it from here? I couldn't wait to do it at home.'

Lisa shook her head, stilling the momentary impulse to ask if they could keep it quiet, at least until Bryn returned. 'Help yourself.'

The older girl dialled a number, waited a brief moment while the receiver was picked up at the other end, then said brightly, 'Hi, Marje. Have I a surprise for you!' She paused and laughed. 'No, not that. I keep telling you Dan and I decided to wait the three years out.' Another pause. 'Well, of course it can't always be planned that easily. We'll just have to wait and see. Do you want to hear what I've got to tell you or not?' She turned her curly brown head to give Lisa a comical grimace. 'You do? Good. I'm over at Bryn's place, and guess what he brought back with him this time! No, idiot, not a new stereo—a wife.'

She held the receiver a little way away from her ear as it exploded into comment clearly audible even from where Lisa sat, laughing as she did so, then put it back into place as the speaker paused for breath. 'Sure I'm sure. I'm sitting here looking right at her now.' The hazel

eyes regarded Lisa across the width of the room, bright with mischief. 'Oh, yes, very! And a super figure! What other kind would Bryn go for? Look, don't just take my word for it, come , on over and see for yourself. Bryn and Dan had to fly down to Serdeles, so I'm getting the crowd over to meet her. Name's Lisa. Oh, and leave the kids behind for once, will you? I think she's going to have enough to contend with for now.' She paused again, expression undergoing a slight change. 'Well, yes, if you want to. I suppose there's no reason why not. Don't know whether you're a sadist or a masochist!'

She put down the phone and smiled at Lisa. 'One down, two more to go. You'll meet everybody else on Saturday at Marje's anyway. We all take it in turns to hold open house at the weekends. It's about the only decent form of entertainment there is in this place.'

The other two conversations took much the same form though they were somewhat shorter in length. 'That's it, then,' she said finally, replacing the receiver for the third and last time. 'We've got maybe half an hour before the invasion. How about a swim while the going's good?'

Lisa was not loth to agree. She felt hot and sticky and ill prepared to cope with a crowd. A swim might help.

Pam had on a bikini under her light cotton dress. She was already in the water when Lisa came down again after changing. She propped her elbows on the edge in frank appraisal.

'I didn't lie. You do have a great body. Just right for a bikini—not too much, not too little!' Catching Lisa's glance, she laughed unrepentantly. 'Excuse the interest. It's sheer plain envy. Dan says I'd pass an Army medical A.1 till they said drop 'em!'

Lisa smiled back. 'It doesn't seem to worry you all that much.'

'Not much point. Good thing Dan's a legs man or I'd never have got away from the starting post.' She stuck one out of the water, slim but shapely. "Not bad, eh?"

'Super!' Lisa returned straight-faced, and ducked the spray of water that came winging up at her, heart suddenly lighter than it had been for days. Pam was going to be good for her—give her back a sense of proportion. The mental pun made her grin, unintentional as it had been. She kicked off her raffia mules and slid into the water, delighting in the coolness on her skin as she struck out for the other side of the oval. Nothing was as bad as it seemed first hand. She and Bryn would work things out once they really started trying.

The other wives arrived all together in one car, coming straight out to the patio in a babble of sound and a clashing of colours. Lisa took mental stock of each as Pam performed informal introductions, hoping she could remember which name belonged to which face. Marjorie O'Rourke was the oldest of the three at around thirty, a short, slightly overweight brunette with a round face and perpetually questing eyes. Next there came Jean Beavers who was more Lisa's own build and perhaps three or four years older, with long dark hair and a pleasantly friendly manner to go with her pretty face. Lastly there was a fair-haired girl in her late twenties whose face held faint lines of discontent around eyes and mouth, rather spoiling her undoubted attractiveness. Her name was Stella.

It was Marjorie who put thoughts into words with a bluntness that made even Pam wince. 'Heavens,' you're little more than a kid,' she said. 'Trust Bryn to catch himself one young enough to train!'

'Don't mind her,' Pam advised dryly. 'She's practising cynicism as a sideline!'

'It was only a joke,' Marjorie protested. 'Bryn would only laugh if I said it to him.'

'Want to bet?' Pam glanced back at Lisa. 'Mind if I tell Mukhtal to bring out some eats? It's gone half past twelve.'

'Of course not.' Lisa felt ashamed that she hadn't thought of it herself. She smiled at the others in apology. 'You'll all have to help me get used to clapping my hands for service. I've never been waited on before.'

'What did you do before you married Bryn?' asked Stella Mallinson curiously.

'I was a secretary—a very junior one.' Lisa steeled herself for the next question and was not disappointed. In the next ten minutes she filled in the bare details of her background, dreading the moment when someone asked how and when she had met Bryn. Yet when it came it proved relatively easy.

'We met at a wedding,' she said with perfect truth. 'It seems a long time ago now.' That also was the truth, so far as it went.

'Well, we knew there was someone he wrote to back home, but nobody guessed he planned on getting married this trip,' Marjorie said. 'A real dark horse is that husband of yours. Mine can't fathom him out even after working alongside for a year.'

'Male couldn't fathom himself out,' murmured Pam in a sotto voce aside, without malice. Aloud she said, 'I've been telling Lisa the set-up around here—Marie's place this weekend, mine next. You'll be given a breathing space, Lisa, before you're expected to put on a do. Not that it's such a big thing. Buffet and drinks, with coffee to sober up oh' before going home.'

Lisa said, 'I thought alcohol was forbidden out here?'

'Officially it is. Unofficially it goes on all over the place. Nobody bothers the European sector providing we keep a low profile and

don't let the servants at the stuff. They're usually out of the way at the weekends anyway. Most of us take picnics out or make barbecues out back during the day. In this part of the world you don't have to wonder if the weather is going to stay warm enough, thank goodness. That's one of the perks of this job.'

'One of the few,' Stella put in, applying sun oil to her arms and legs. 'Bet you haven't told her about the flies and the mosquitoes later on in the year. Or the stink in the streets when the garbage wagon forgets to come.'

'Oh, shut up, Stell,' Jean Beavers said lightly. 'It isn't that bad even at its worst. Your trouble is you're determined to see nothing but the worst side.'

'Can I help it if I want to go home? The thought of another two years out here gives me the shudders!' Stella's tone was impassioned. 'It's all right for you lot, you can take the sun and the heat and lap it up. I use a bottle of this stuff a week and I still burn raw. If I'd known what it was going to be like I'd never have let Keith apply for this job in the first place!'

'You could always take the kids home,' said Pam.

'And leave Keith here on his own? No fear!'

'Well, you can't' have it both ways. It's our unfortunate lot to follow whither our menfolk lead.' From the look of her Pam had her tongue tucked firmly in her cheek. 'Consider yourself lucky not to have been born Libyan. Did you know that among all the Muslim countries, Libya is one of the least emancipated in its attitude towards women?' She looked across at Lisa again now. 'Most of them still wear the *barracan*—that's a kind of white tent that leaves just one eye bare. Even the ones who've progressed to Western dress sometimes wear a black net over the face in public. Men outside the family aren't

allowed to look at a woman's face, you see. It's considered worse than showing her ...'

'Pam!' Jean was laughing. 'If Dan was here he'd flay you!'

'But he isn't, sweet love. My better half is at present winging his way over the desert wastes along with our camp commandant.' Her grin was infectious. 'Lisa, you don't know what you've let yourself in for joining our clan. We're a real mixed bunch.'

Lisa could go along with that. Yet there was some quality which drew her to the quartet. Balance, perhaps. She hoped she would not tip the scales too far in any one direction.

Over that day and the next she came to accustom herself a little more to this country to which Bryn had brought her, to listen five times a day to the strange wailing chant borne on the breeze from the city minarets, to smell the scents and spices wafted in on that same breeze and try to guess their origin. Pam stayed over both nights the men were ! away, committing her own Company home to the care of her 'daily' without apparent concern.

'How Bryn managed to get a couple to live in God only knows,' she said on one occasion. 'The rest of us put up with what we can get in the way of staff. My girl cooks and cleans fairly well, but she won't stay late when I'm having people in even though she is one of the more Westernised ones. You're lucky having Hawa round all the time. She'll babysit for you come the time it's necessary.'

Lisa gave her a sharp glance, but there was no hint of underlying motive in the other girl's expression. She couldn't know, of course. No one did. She had almost forgotten the possibility herself.

It returned now full-fold; she had to still the sudden urge to place her fingers over her flat stomach and try to gauge any gain. As if there would be yet, anyway. She did a quick calculation. Ten days or so to

go before she could be sure. If Bryn hadn't been in quite such a hurry to get back there might not have been any need to marry at all.

The thought shamed her. There was more to it than that —there had to be. Bryn needed a wife and she was going to try to give him what he needed. Mutual respect made a good basis, and from that other emotions could grow. The fact that he could already hurt her suggested a deeper involvement on her part than she had once anticipated. She wasn't in love with him, but he could awake sensations she had never before experienced in full. She wished suddenly and yearningly that he were here right now, big and strong and vital. The need was like a pain deep down inside her.

On the Wednesday Pam took her into the city proper, warning her first that she would be stared at.

'Considering most of their own women spend the greater part of their lives wrapped up to the eyebrows it's hardly surprising the men find foreigners something to be ogled at,' she said in the car driving towards the city. 'We're all asked not to wear slacks or shorts in the street, and to keep our skirt hems at a fairly decent level. Good thing the mini went out when it did. Half of us wouldn't even have got into the country!'

Lisa found the tour a joy regardless. With its wide shimmering bay and sparkling white buildings, Tripoli had to be one of the loveliest cities in the whole Mediterranean. They began in the old quarter, calling first at the Tourism department to secure a permit to visit the mosques. At the Caramanli they took off their shoes in accordance with custom and walked stocking-footed around the sumptuously decorated interior, admiring the beauty of Renaissance columns soaring aloft to support the many arches, the colours and patterns of the tiles lining the walls. An attendant took them up to the roof for a view out over the Castle and city, pointing out places they must not

miss visiting with a long brown finger and a pride of origin that took little note of his obvious sprinkling of Italian blood.

Outside again, there were the crowds and brightness of Suq-al-Mushir where the local traders did business. Tourists were plentiful and the noise overwhelming. There was the street of the Coppersmiths, the Artisans' market with tiny shops arranged round a central patio selling goods made of leather and brass and copper. Lisa bought a hand- tooled shoulder bag for a little over three pounds sterling, and would have happily paid double if Pam hadn't taken a hand in the transaction.

'Don't for heaven's sake ever pay the asking price,' she admonished when they were out of the shop. 'You'll not only be shelling out through the nose, you'll be depriving them of the whole joy in selling. Arabs love bargaining. They'll think you an idiot if you don't barter them down. Don't worry, he'll still have made a good profit on what you did pay. Let's go to the Suq-at-Turk—that's the covered market. I think I can find it.'

The only incident to mar the day happened close by the Arch of Marcus Aurelius on the seafront when a youth in Western jeans and a dirty white shirt started pestering Lisa. All injunctions for him to go away met with no success. Eventually they managed to dodge him up a side street, pausing for breath after darting through the crowds for several minutes.

'It's that hair of yours,' Pam gasped, leaning against the nearest piece of solid wall. 'In this light it's like a beacon!'

'Plus the fact that we seem to be about the only foreign women without men of our own around,' Lisa came back dryly. 'I think we'd better start making tracks back to the car, don't you.'

'If I can find the way back from here. God knows where we are.' Hazel eyes met green without undue concern. 'Don't worry, we can always ask. Most people speak good old English, if my bit of Arabic doesn't get us through.'

They were both weary by the time they did reach the car again, and more than ready to call it a day. Pam waited until they were heading out through the Americanised - suburb on the Sabratha road before saying casually, 'By the way, I wouldn't mention what happened to Bryn if I were you. He'll only say we were asking for it going in there on our own.' Her grin came and went. 'Self-preservation really. I'll be the one to get it in the neck for taking you.'

'From Bryn,' Lisa asked, 'or from Dan?'

'From them both. You're the new girl. Dan said to look after you. He's told me not to visit the *souks* without him, but waiting till he finds the time to take me is like waiting for Christmas!' She sounded unrepentant. 'What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve for.'

Lisa laughed. 'You're incorrigible!'

'I know—but nice with it.'

She was too. Lisa hated to think how she would have got through this two days without her. Pam was the greatest fun in the world, and they were already firm friends. Life at the moment seemed good.

The other girl returned home the following morning to prepare, as she put it, for the coming of her lord and master. Left to her own devices until Bryn's expected return in the late afternoon, Lisa swam and sunbathed during the morning, ate a light lunch of cheese and salad, then settled down with a book in a shady corner of the patio to while away the siesta hours.

She must have dozed off at some point. Her first awareness of another presence was when someone picked up the dropped book from the floor and replaced it on the arm of her lounge.

Opening her eyes, she found herself looking up into a pair of coolly appraising blue ones set in a composed and smoothly attractive face. The woman's hair was a natural pale blonde cut short to the shape of her head. She looked Scandinavian, though when she spoke her accent was as English as Lisa's own.

'Sorry I couldn't get by to meet you sooner. I was a bit tied up when Marjorie phoned to tell me the news.' A faint spark glinted momentarily in the blueness of her eyes. 'I'm Andrea Farron. My husband Mark is in charge of the refinery.'

Mark. The name brought a swift sharp pang. Lisa struggled to her feet, feeling at a distinct disadvantage against this elegant woman in her tailored cream silk dress.

'It's good of you to take the trouble,' she stammered, wondering why Pam had failed to mention this apparent fifth member of their immediate circle. At least she assumed that was what she was if Marjorie had phoned her. 'I'm afraid Bryn isn't here at the moment,' she added somewhat unnecessarily. 'He went to Serdeles' with Dan Anders. I'm expecting him back later this afternoon.' Belatedly, she gathered herself. 'Would you like a cool drink? I'll get Mukhtal to bring some.'

'Make mine iced tea,' said Andrea. 'It's the only thing I drink during the day.' She looked amused as Lisa reached for her sandals to go and give Mukhtal the order. 'Don't you run after the servants; they're here to run after you. Shout him out. If he was doing his job properly he'd be here without summoning. I had to let myself in.'

'I'm sorry.' Lisa hardly knew what else to say. She lifted her voice and called for the Arab, relieved when he appeared as if by magic almost at once.

'Oh, Mukhtal, we'd like iced tea, please,' she said.

The Libyan shook his head dolefully. 'Ice box not working, Saida. Everything is warm.'

'Have you reported it?' Andrea demanded before Lisa could speak, then as he shook his head, 'And why not? You'd better get it fixed right now before Mr Venner gets back or he'll have something to say! And bring some hot tea instead.'

'Yes, Saida.' The dark face was expressionless. 'A few minutes.'

Andrea turned back to Lisa with a shake of her head, settling herself more comfortably on the padded chair as she did so. 'Sorry to take over like that, but these people need gingering up if you want to get any real service out of them. Bryn will throw three fits if there's no ice for his whisky tonight.' The smile did not reach her eyes. 'But of course you'd already know Bryn's ways.'

'Not all of them,' Lisa said levelly, fighting the antipathy suddenly roused in her, though without much success. 'We haven't been married long.'

'Oh, but I understood from Marjorie that you knew him before he came out here to Libya. Isn't that right?'

'Well ... yes.' It was the first outright lie she had told and she hated doing it, but there seemed little choice. 'But you don't learn everything about a person from letters.'

'No, I don't suppose you do.' The sensually shaped mouth twisted slightly. 'You're a lot younger than I expected.'

Lisa met her gaze without flinching. 'What did you expect?'

The laugh sounded brittle. 'As a matter of fact, it came as a complete surprise to hear Bryn was married at all. He never gave the impression of being the marrying type.'

'But the Company prefers married men.'

'Well, I suppose basically they do. They seem to think they're more stable.' The irony was faint but discernible. 'Bryn was never one to knuckle under to officialdom. They got him on his terms, not theirs.'

'You knew him before he came out here too?'

'No.' Her smile was tinged with a little malice. 'It's just that the situation here tends to throw people together rather more than normal. We're all foreigners in a foreign land. We stick together.'

Lisa tried not to let the nasty little suspicion forming at the back of her mind gain any more ground, but every word this woman said seemed scheduled to suggest it. She remembered taunting Bryn in the taxi that first day with his lack of a woman of his own to take back to Libya with him, and his reply: 'I'll just have to borrow someone else's.' Was it remotely possible that he'd been doing just that with Mark Farron's wife? It would certainly account for the attitude Andrea was taking right now.

'Have you been married long yourself?' she managed to ask in a reasonably level tone, and saw another of the brittle smiles cross the other face.

'Too long. Mark and I are what you might call "keeping up appearances", though for how much longer is anybody's guess. He'll be sorry to hear Bryn got caught up in the syndrome too. He envied him his ability to steer clear of entanglements. On the other hand, he'll approve of you once he sees you, I'm sure.'

Lisa wasn't sure whether that was meant to be a compliment or not. She suspected the latter. Andrea Farron was not the kind to toss flattery around.

The tea arrived, borne by a silent and unsmiling Mukhtal. From his attitude it was apparent to Lisa at least that he was not kindly disposed towards her visitor. After the manner in which Andrea had spoken to him, she was not surprised. This was the man's own country they were in; he was entitled to his dignity.

Drinking the hot but amazingly refreshing tea, she calculated that the other woman was around twenty-six or seven, perhaps even more than that. A blonde like June Wrexham—Bryn seemed to prefer blondes. All her newfound confidence had flown. He had been forced into this marriage of theirs and it was all her fault.

Yet if he really had been having an affair with this woman why had he gone to England to propose marriage to June? common sense asked her. Was she perhaps reading far too much into a few ambiguous remarks? She had to give him the benefit of the doubt. She owed him at least that much.

CHAPTER THREE

ANDREA left at three-thirty, leaving Lisa with the feeling still in her bones that she had only come to make mischief in the first place. At four there was a phone call from the Anders' villa. It was Dan speaking, his tone apologetic.

'Lisa, I'm sorry to tell you Bryn has to stay on till Saturday morning—something only he can handle, I'm afraid. He said to tell you he's sorry.' There was an odd note in his voice. 'Pam thought you might like to come over and stay with us for a couple of days. We'd both love to have you.'

'Thanks.' Lisa kept her own voice steady by sheer effort of will. 'But being married to an oil man I'd better start getting used to this kind of thing, hadn't I?'

'I suppose so. His job takes him off pretty often.' Dan hesitated. 'You ought to learn to drive as soon as possible, Lisa, then Bryn could organise you a car. It's the only way the women can get out without having to rely on anyone else. Pam could teach you the rudiments to start with.'

Lisa made herself laugh and was surprised at the lightness of the sound. 'I'd probably scare her and everybody else on the road to death! I'll think about it, Dan. Thanks for letting me know. Did you have a good flight back?'

'Bumpy, but we got here.' He added swiftly, 'Look, you're at least coming out to us for a meal tonight. I'll pick you up about six-thirty. Okay?'

She didn't want to go, but there was no way of refusing that wouldn't sound odd and hurtful. 'That will be lovely,' she said. 'I'll look forward

to seeing you again, Dan. We didn't have much time to speak to one another on Tuesday.'

'No, and I don't suppose I'll get much of a word in edgeways tonight, knowing that wife of mine,' he came back dryly. 'You two seem to have really hit it off.'

'Yes, we have.' Lisa was thankful for it. She was going to need all the distraction she could find. 'Au revoir!'

He laughed. 'It's *beslama* here. See you in a couple of hours or so.'

Lisa replaced the receiver with a heavy hand. Depression swamped her. Bryn hadn't even bothered to pretend to send any message such as a new husband might be expected to send his bride of a couple of weeks. What would Dan be thinking right now? Or did he know Bryn well enough not to think anything of his apparent neglect? Some men were reticent about showing their feelings at the best of times. Probably Dan would put it down to that.

Not that it really mattered what anyone else thought or felt, she acknowledged miserably. The lack was hers to feel. How was she going to get through two more days of this kind of loneliness?

Dan was exactly as she remembered him from that fleeting meeting. He put her into the car with a flattering comment on her appearance in the blue linen she had not worn before. He was dressed casually and comfortably in slacks and open-necked shirt himself, his tanned features not far off the colour of his light brown hair. Lisa felt at ease in his company in a way she never felt with Bryn. The difference being that sex did not enter into the relationship, she reflected cynically. It was the only way a man and a woman could really be friends.

She enjoyed the evening with the Anders, although watching the two of them together and listening to the constant banter that went on

between them made her heart ache a little. Marriage could be fun when two people were as suited as Pam and Dan. They complemented each other, Dan supplying the touch of stability Pam perhaps lacked. Returning to the emptiness of her own home was even worse, but she insisted on going.

'I have to stand on my own feet,' she said when Pam protested. 'You've kept me company for two days and nights, and given me another evening as well. I can find plenty to do till Saturday, honestly.'

'Well then, don't forget Saturday night at the O'Rourkes', Pam finally agreed. 'Bryn isn't a Marjorie fan, as you might imagine, but he'll usually turn up for Malcolm's sake. You'll like Male. Bit on the weak side, but he prefers a quiet life.' She pulled a face. 'Not that he gets it with Marje around. She's got ambitions for him he just can't meet.'

'Haven't you all?' Dan put in with irony, and drew a bland smile.

'Ah, but *I* know *your* limitations, lover!' Laughing, she dodged the hand he lifted to her. 'No wife-beating in front of the bride! You'll put her off the whole idea. Goodnight, Lisa. Phone me if you change your mind about tomorrow. We could go down to the beach with the girls and talk kids, clothes and gossip if you like.'

Lisa shook her head, laughing herself. 'I'll save that for later. See you Saturday night.'

Dan was quiet in the car. It wasn't until they were nearing the villa that he said diffidently, 'You know, it was a bit of a shock when I first realised how young you were the other morning, but in a lot of ways you're far better balanced than a lot of girls I've met years older. I think you're just what Bryn needs to stop him turning into an out-and-out cynic. He's been getting that way lately.'

'I know.' She said it softly. 'Thanks, Dan. I hope you're right.' She hadn't really meant to ask, but the words were out before she knew it, 'Is Mark Farron a particular friend of Bryn's?'

Something altered in Dan's manner, a certain tension touching his mouth. 'I wouldn't exactly say that. Why?'

'His wife popped in to see me this afternoon. Andrea?'

'Yes, Andrea.' The pause was brief but loaded. 'Oh well, I suppose she was just being friendly—welcoming the newcomer and all that.'

'But they're not part of what you called your immediate circle?' she insisted.

'No, I don't suppose they are, come to that, although we see them both most weekends when everybody gets together.' He shifted uncomfortably. 'Wish the Company would start using another rental firm. I'm darned certain this lot take all the springing out before they lease them.'

Lisa accepted the change of subject without demur. It confirmed one thing for her: Dan did not want to talk about Andrea Farron in any connection with Bryn. So there had been something. She wondered what. And how many of the others knew—including Mark Farron himself?

By Saturday morning she had managed to sort out her emotions to some extent, although the ache still persisted. What Bryn had done before marrying her was not really her affair, and that was how she was going to view it. If he had wanted Andrea for keeps he would hardly have contemplated getting himself another girl for a wife, would he? Let sleeping dogs lie—providing they stayed asleep.

He arrived mid-afternoon looking drawn around the eyes and mouth but otherwise no different from when he had left. Hardly knowing

how he expected her to greet him, Lisa took refuge in brightness, asking him if he wanted a drink, how his journey had been, and whether everything was all right now on site. He answered all her questions with the same ironic smile hovering about his lips, eyes moving her where she reclined on the lounge.

'Glad to see you've started tanning sensibly,' he commented. 'I thought you might have trouble with that fair skin of yours. A redhead's skin doesn't usually tan at all.'

'I'm not strictly a redhead,' she said. 'Providing I'm careful I won't burn.' She looked up at him, tall and broad-shouldered in the lightweight denim slacks and shirt, feeling nerve and sinew contract. 'Are you sure you won't have that drink?'

'I'm going up to have a shower first,' he said. 'Tell Mukhtal twenty minutes. I'll have a whisky.'

'On the rocks?'

One eyebrow lifted with a trace of mockery. 'Right on!'

'Bryn.' His name came out almost involuntarily as he turned to go back indoors again. Lisa felt herself flushing a little as he looked back at her. 'I'm glad you're back,' she got out.

'So am I.' The mockery was still there, but as much self-directed as anything. 'You look good in a bikini, by the way. Tantalising.'

The flush deepened despite all she could do to stop it. 'We're invited out to the O'Rourke's tonight,' she said quickly, and saw his mouth tilt.

'That's standard. Don't worry, we'll go. I can't deprive you of what little entertainment there is.'

She bit her lip as he went indoors, aware that he had misunderstood her too hasty remark. She had to be alone with him some time tonight, and it was not fear of that moment which made her want to go out first. She knew what it was, of course. She had known from the first. Andrea Farron would probably be there.

They left at eight to drive the short distance to the O'Rourkes' villa in Giorginpopoli, passing the neon-lit 'Chicken on Wheels' and the Bowling Arena which made the suburb such a home from home for American tourists and residents alike. Most of the Company rented villas were roughly the same size. Marjorie's had only a tiny garden and no pool but was otherwise comfortable enough. She greeted them with an enthusiasm that overrode Bryn's distinct lack of it, pulling Lisa over towards a small crowd standing nearby.

'I want you to meet my husband,' she said, and caught a short, sandy-haired man wearing horn-rimmed glasses by the arm. 'Male, this is Bryn's wife. Isn't she just something !'

Malcolm O'Rourke held out a diffident hand, his thin, unremarkable face plucking up a smile. 'Nice to have you with us. I never thought Bryn would fetch up with a wife— especially right out of the blue like that. Do you think you're going to like Libya?'

'Give the girl time,' someone else chimed in. 'She hasn't been here five minutes. How about the rest of us, Marje?'

Over the following few minutes Lisa found herself introduced to people whose names she knew she would not remember next time they met. She refused to let the thought worry her; that was something which would eventually sort itself out. The one person she did not want to see didn't seem to have arrived as yet—if she was coming at all, of course.

It wasn't until the crowd across the room from her parted a little to let Malcolm through with a loaded tray that she caught a glimpse of the sculptured blonde head lifted to a too familiar dark one with an expression that made her heart jerk. Andrea looked stunning in white, her shoulders bared by the low neckline of her dress. She had a voluptuous figure, and she was conscious of it, her stance posed to make the most of it. The red lips were smiling, a glass held tauntingly against the full lower lip as if to test the coldness. Bryn had his back to her so it was impossible to judge his reaction, but from the set of his shoulders he was not about to move on.

'We haven't met yet,' a voice said from just behind Lisa's shoulder with a lazy inflection, and she turned to meet a pair of amused brown eyes. 'I'm Mark Farron,' he added. 'That's my wife over there with your husband. You're like a tonic in this crowd, you know. Fresh as a spring-flower!'

'They soon wilt,' she retorted, and found herself smiling back. 'I think I need stamina more than anything.'

'You'll acquire that. We all do.' He rocked on his heels, hands thrust casually into the pockets of his light jacket, studying her with a depth of interest she found unnerving. 'I must say Bryn's a lucky guy! How did he find you?'

'By accident,' she said. 'Fate perhaps?'

'Sweep you off your feet, did he?'

'You could say that.' The irony was kept to herself. 'I understand you're in charge of the whole refinery?'

'Only until we've finished developing and extending, then the Libyans will put a man in. It's joint ownership, you know. Unilibya means just that all the way down the line. We're here to show them the ropes, then leave them to it.'

'Except for Bryn?'

'His job is different. The trouble-shooter to end all trouble-shooters, is your husband. He covers the Tunisian fields too, of course—but I suppose you know that already. I hear he stopped a near-riot down south a couple of days ago.'

Lisa's head jerked up. 'I didn't realise there'd been that much trouble.'

His shrug was easy. 'Men don't tell their wives everything. Guess I should have kept my mouth shut.'

'Tell me about it,' she pleaded.

'Nothing much to tell. Something to do with pay—it usually is. Bryn has authority to meet any demands he sees fit. I don't know whether he offered more or convinced them they were getting enough. He's done that before. Your glass is empty. What are you drinking?'

'Gin and tonic, I think. A very weak one, please.'

'That's the only kind you'll get from Malcolm anyway. He doesn't really approve of infringing the drink laws. When in Rome ...' He shook his head mockingly. 'I wouldn't mind if the whole lot of them stuck to the Koran, but you should see one or two of the outlying beaches when there's been a bottle party the night before: Men only, of course. There's a saying that no Cyrenaican drinks —except to excess. Stay right there. I'll be back in a tick.'

Lisa watched him go, smiling a little. There was something about Mark Farron that attracted her in spite of everything. He was a couple of inches or so shorter than Bryn though about the same age, lean as a greyhound, his dark brown hair falling in a thick comma over his forehead. Sharply intelligent—he would have to be to hold down the job he was doing—and witty into the bargain. Andrea should think herself lucky.

Lisa spent the following hour with him, and at intervals with others too. Like Bryn, Mark seemed to stand aside from the general throng—an observer rather than a joiner. Once she caught Bryn watching the two of them from across the room.' Andrea seemed to have deserted him for the moment. She gave him a bright smile and a little wave of her hand but made no attempt to break off her conversation with Mark to go to him. Why should she? Let him come to her, if he wanted her.

It was some time later that she went upstairs to the bathroom. In the O'Rourke villa this lay along the corridor on the left. Passing one of the bedroom doors, Lisa heard a sudden muffled laugh followed by a voice she recognised immediately despite its lowered tone: 'Darling, do close that door! Do you want your wife to catch us?' If there was a reply she didn't hear it, but the door snicked quietly shut behind her.

The wall mirror was spotted and out of true, lending a faintly lopsided effect to one's face. Gazing at her reflection, Lisa clamped down on the thoughts swirling about at the base of her mind and concentrated on applying lipstick with a firm hand. The door was still closed when she went past again, and no sound came from within. Perhaps she had been wrong after all. It could have been anyone in there. And what they got up to was their own affair.

Downstairs again she joined Mark with a smile on her lips, the latter quickly stiffening as her glance around the room failed to find either Bryn or Andrea among the crowd. Suspicion turned to acceptance. There was only one place they could be. She hadn't been wrong at all— about anything.

Somehow she got through the rest of the evening. At some point Bryn reappeared looking entirely his usual imperturbable self. No telltale signs like lipstick on his collar or blonde hairs sticking to his jacket. But then there wouldn't be. That sort of give-away only happened in fiction. Real life men had enough sense to check first.

Mark was looking at her curiously when she turned her attention back to him. 'Feeling neglected?' he asked softly.

'With you around?' She gave a laugh, and knew it sounded false. 'I haven't had time yet.'

'It wasn't me I was talking about.' He obviously didn't accept hints. 'Bryn's hardly been near you all night. I'm surprised at him, new bride and all—especially considering he only got back this afternoon.' His eyes held a wicked gleam in them. 'If you were mine this is the last place we'd be right now. But maybe our priorities aren't quite the same.' He looked past her, expression changing. 'Or maybe I'm wrong about that too. Looks like you might be leaving.'

Lisa stiffened as Bryn's hand came lightly on her shoulder from behind.

'Time we went,' he said. 'I've been up since five.' His tone was easy but carried a faint chill. 'Thanks for looking after my wife.'

'No hardship. I never knew one of these affairs pass so fast. I'll even look forward to next week's!' Mark gave Lisa a slow smile. 'She's quite a girl!'

Leave-taking was accomplished quickly and pleasantly despite Marjorie's protests that they were breaking up the party. Bryn didn't speak in the car. He seemed remote, like a stranger. He *was* a stranger, Lisa thought numbly. She knew nothing of what went on in that arrogant dark head of his. Perhaps he was regretting that it wasn't Andrea he was taking home to bed.

Revulsion set shudderingly in: Knowing what she did how could she bear to even sleep in the same room, much less anything else? So face him with it. Let him see she was not prepared to accept that kind of double dealing. But supposing he denied it? What actual proof did she have? She hadn't seen him in that room with Andrea; she hadn't

even heard his voice. But he'd been there right enough; she could sense it in him.

Whether deliberately or not, he said he had a couple of things he had to check on reaching the villa, and gave her time to prepare for bed on her own. She was lying with her face turned to the window when he came up. With the moonlight so bright, he didn't bother switching on any lights again, but began undressing in the semi-darkness.

'You're not asleep,' he said at length, 'so stop pretending. You've had four days to get used to this whole situation—long enough to realise that the longer we let things stand the more difficult it's going to get.'

He came across and sat on the edge of the bed, turning her towards him with a hand on her shoulder. His expression was hard to read in the soft light. She lowered her eyes to the region of his bared chest and kept them there, watching the play of muscle across his rib cage as he breathed.

'I know,' she said.

His hand moved a little to trace the line of her collarbone beneath the thin cotton. He said softly, 'I'll say one thing for Farron, he has good taste. You looked very lovely tonight.'

Lisa could bring herself neither to find a reply nor to move away from his touch. He looked at her for a long suspended moment, then bent and put his lips gendy to hers, teasing them apart in a way which started the blood singing in her veins. Feeling her response, he became a little more demanding, hands moving to curve her shoulders and then slide down over her arms, the touch of his fingers like fire and ice on her skin at one and the same time.

She felt things begin to slide away from her, thought blanking out to the feeling rising in her. Memories, vague yet emotive, tantalised her senses. He had kissed her like this before, mouth moving with

exquisite lightness of touch down the line of her throat; had held her like this, hands caressing the length of her body, finding every curve, moulding her breasts through the barrier of her nightdress until she ached for his touch against her skin.

'You're perfect,' he murmured. 'Every last inch of you! Let me take this off, darling, and hold you properly.'

.It was that, the practised endearment, which snapped her out from under the spell to sudden quivering rejection.

She wanted to hurt him, to reach in under that impregnability and stab him deep. Hands flat against his chest, she pushed him savagely away, surprising herself with her own strength. 'No, I can't! It's no use, I just *can't!*'

He made no attempt to take hold of her again, sitting in stunned immobility for several seconds. When he did finally speak his voice sounded unfamiliar, thick and rough.

'What do you mean, you can't? You were ready right then—and willing!'

'I was pretending to be. I was trying to make myself bear it.' The shudder that ran through her was not play-acting. 'But I can't! I just can't bear you touching me!'

His face was a mask, tautly etched against the light from the window. 'I won't accept that,' he said. 'Lisa, you're acting like a hysterical teenager. You wanted me to make love to you a few moments ago. You wanted it with everything in you. Now for God's sake let's stop the stupidity and start making sense!'

'It's the truth.' She was pressed as far to the other side of the bed from him as she could get without actually falling out. 'I was acting, that's all. At least I tried.'

'Then try again.' He pulled her back to him, hands on her arms, holding her grimly as she struggled to free herself. 'Stop it, do you hear me? You're being ridiculous. *Stop* it, Lisa!'

The pain he was inflicting drowned out every last remnant of control. Dropping her head, she sank her teeth into the back of his hand until they met bone, holding on even when she tasted blood in her mouth. She heard him swear sharply and felt him take her by the hair to drag her head up again. His eyes were blazing, his teeth clenched.

'You damned little vixen!'

'You should have left me alone when I asked you to!'

Her limbs felt like jelly, her throat tight as a drum. 'You don't have any right to *force* me to do something I don't want to do!'

'I'm your husband,' he fired back. 'I've a right to expect you to act like an adult, not some schoolgirl!' The hand still fastened in her hair jerked her roughly towards him, opening her lips on a mute sound of protest. His own were searing, forcing her head back against his arm. Then as suddenly he loosed his grip, pushing her back into the pillows again, expression disgusted. 'That's no answer!'

She lay still as he got to his feet and moved across the room. His bare feet made no sound along the corridor, but she heard the noise of running water and the click of the cabinet door. She still hadn't moved when he came back to the bedroom.

'Try that again,' he said grimly, 'and I shan't give a damn how you feel about anything!'

Her voice came low. 'I thought you said that was no answer.'

'It isn't, but it would be some satisfaction.'

He sat down on his own bed and reached for cigarettes, illuminating the hardness of his features with the flame of his lighter. For a moment or two he smoked in silence, the glowing tip never far from his lips. Lisa could feel the tension like something tangible in the room. Her own anger and searing hatred had died, leaving her numb. Where they went from here she had no idea. All she did know was there was no way she could bring herself to climb down from her stance. He couldn't have both her *and* Andrea.

'I'm sorry I bit you,' she got out at last. 'I really thought you were going to force me.'

'Maybe I was,' he said. 'You caught me on the raw.' His tone roughened again. 'Have you any idea what it feels like to be kicked in the gut? You might be able to switch yourself off at the drop of a hat, but the average male needs letting down easy.'

'I couldn't help it.' There was nothing else she could say.

'Then it's God help both of us.'

He ground out the half smoked cigarette with a heavy hand and got into bed, drawing up the single sheet round his waist to lie on his back looking up at the ceiling.

After a time he said, 'We're going to have to talk it out, Lisa. It can't be left this way.' He was obviously making every effort to be reasonable. 'What is it that frightens you?'

'It isn't fear.' Her own voice was little more than a whisper.

'Revolts you, then,' on a tighter note. 'I did nothing I haven't done to you before. You wanted my hands on you then. You even ...'

'Don't!' The word was torn from her. 'I'd had too much to drink that night. I didn't know what I was doing!'

'You knew what all right—I wouldn't swear you knew who with.' The pause was underscored. 'Were you wishing it was Mark making love to you just now?'

Her answer came without thinking, without fully realising what she was saying. 'We only met tonight.'

Bryn seemed to freeze, his whole body rigid. She realised his construction and tried desperately to correct it. '*I* didn't mean that. I ...'

'I know exactly what you meant.' The quietness was more emphatic than if he had shouted. 'And I'm warning you. Stay away from Farron!'

I'll strike a bargain, she wanted to say wildly. Let's *both* stay away from the Farrons! But the words wouldn't come. To hear him deny it would hurt just as much as to hear it confirmed. She knew the truth; she had to accept it.

Neither of them spoke again. There was nothing left to say. Two feet of space separated them; it could as well have been a thousand light years.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIFE settled into a pattern of sorts over the following week or so. With the men out of the way during the greater part of the day, the women tended towards group gatherings either at the beach or one of the villas, taking packed salads and steaks to cook over open fires.

The Company itself provided education for the five to nines via the services of one engineer's wife who happened to be a qualified teacher. Beyond this, boarding school was the only answer, although children were flown out to spend all holidays with their parents as a matter of course at Company expense. As the pupils were few concentration on the individual was possible, providing a grounding more than adequate to requirements, Lisa gathered. The only difficulty might lie in teaching a child the art of group learning again when the time came.

As the two childless members of their immediate circle, she and Pam often found themselves sitting on the sidelines when it came to conversation, listening with varying degrees of resignation while virtues were extolled and incidents related.

'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em,' Pam commented wryly, driving homewards one afternoon. 'You and Bryn are both pretty bright. Stands to reason you'll have clever kids.' She cast an oblique glance. 'Or are you planning on waiting like Dan and me?'

Lisa forced a smile and a shrug, aware of the question mark still hanging over her. 'I can't say it's something we got round to discussing yet.'

'It's a crucial issue.'

'Does it have to be?' She was trying hard to keep it light. 'Financially, there's no reason why we shouldn't start a family right away, I suppose.'

'I wasn't talking about the financial side of it, and well you know it,' Pam retorted with the candour to which Lisa was fast becoming accustomed. 'Dan and I are both agreed that learning to live with somebody can be difficult enough without adding to the complications. By the time it happens I want to be in a position where I can handle both relationships. Besides,' she added with a return to humour, 'can you imagine being pregnant in-this heat!'

Lisa couldn't, and didn't want to try. So far it could still go either way. Whichever way the question was finally resolved it could hardly worsen the situation from its present deadlock. Living with Bryn was more than difficult. There were times when it seemed impossible. Not that she could fault his treatment of her. That might even be part of the trouble. If he would shout, lose his temper with her, demand some kind of reckoning, she might be able to bring herself to voice her suspicions. Suspicion? No, it was a little more than that, wasn't it? Conviction was closer to what she felt—a feeling that grew every time they came into contact with Andrea Farron.

A screech of brakes and a muttered curse from Pam brought her back to awareness as they rounded a bend. A camel stood placidly halfway across the roadway, jaws moving in a ruminative fashion as it contemplated the scene of frenzied excitement before it. Two Arabs wearing the traditional *djellaba* were arguing in the midst of a milling string of pannier-loaded donkeys, arms extravagantly flung, voices jabbering. A small crowd had gathered from nowhere to watch and listen, the children wide-eyed and grinning, the adults taking sides among themselves.

The toot of the Renault's horn brought no response whatsoever from anybody, least of all the camel. Only on the second attempt did one of the small bare-footed boys start taking an interest.

'*Imshi!*' Pam called to him, pointing at the camel. 'We want to pass!'

The boy grinned with a flash of excellent teeth and approached the car, hand automatically extending. '*Flus*,' he demanded. 'You give?'

It was Lisa who reached into her purse and fished out a coin, pressing it into the eager palm without bothering to check its denomination. From the quick widening of the grin it was more than enough. He went and took hold of the animal's rope halter, reaching on tiptoe, he was so diminutive, and leaning his whole weight into the pull. For a moment the camel stayed right where it was, still wearing the same expression of haughty disdain, then with an audible rumble of stomach juices it took a couple of slow, swaying strides forward. Catching the movement from the corner of his eye, one of the warring traders rounded on the boy, snatching the halter and lifting a hand to a figure no longer within reach.

'Let's get out of here before we get roped in,' Pam said hastily, and let in the clutch to scrape past the camel's rear end with bare inches to spare. An angry shout from the animal's owner followed them, causing her to step on the accelerator with some alacrity. 'You'd think they owned the roads!' she exclaimed, then gave the familiar grin. 'Come to think of it, so they do! I keep forgetting we're the foreigners here.'

Lisa could never forget it. The terrain and people aside, the heat alone was enough to remind her she was far from home. She knew a swift pang of longing for the feel of soft rain on her face, of cool breezes in her hair. Here the wind blew hot from the south, bringing with it the dust of desert wastes. She supposed she should feel thankful they were based on the coast and not stuck inland in some sticky hell miles from anywhere like the men who actually ran the installations.

'Don't forget the four of us are going out to dinner tonight,' said Pam when she dropped her off at the villa. 'It's time we had a bit of a beanfeast. Do you prefer Greek or Italian food?'

Lisa looked her surprise. 'What's wrong with Libyan?'

'Nothing at all, except that we've yet to find a restaurant capable of serving a really good local dish. You need to eat out privately for that. Get Bryn to take you to Majid Shalhi's place some time. He's the man scheduled to take over the refinery when the time comes. His wife is a poppet, though by our standards she doesn't have much of a life of her own. Mind you, if I had a husband who looked like Omar Sharif's double, maybe I wouldn't be all that bothered about going out on my own either!' She lifted a hand in laughing farewell. 'See you later.'

At four-thirty in the afternoon it was still too hot to think about doing anything which called for exertion. Bryn was out at the refinery, and would not be back for a couple of hours or so yet. Neither Mukhtal nor Hawa were anywhere to be seen. Lisa didn't bother calling for service. She fixed herself a cool drink and took it out with her to the patio, pausing in some consternation when Mark Farron greeted her indolently from one of the loungers.

'I thought you were .never going to get back,' he' said. 'Hope you don't mind me taking advantage of the pool while I was waiting.'

Her answer was automatic. 'Of course not.' He had not long been out of the water, she registered, because his trunks were still damp. His body was lean and wiry, his chest free of the hair which covered Bryn's in such profusion. His eyebrows were faintly lifted when she met his eyes again, a smile hovering about his mouth.

'I came prepared, as you can see. Presumptuous of me to take so much for granted, was it?'

'There's no reason why you shouldn't use the pool,' she said quickly. 'I was just surprised to see you here at this time of day, that's all. Bryn is out at the refinery this afternoon.'

'I know. That's why I'm here. I haven't had a chance to talk to you properly since that first night we met. He kept a pretty close eye on you last weekend.'

To the detriment of his own pleasures, Lisa acknowledged mentally and unemotionally. She looked back at Mark with some uncertainty, hardly knowing how to react.

'Does Mukhtal know you're here?' was all she could think of to say.

'Sure. He supplied me with liquid refreshment.' The tone was calm and assured. 'You don't have to worry about him mentioning this visit of mine to Bryn. I took care of that.'

'You had no right to do that.'

'You mean Bryn wouldn't mind me calling on you?'

'Yes ... I mean no. I ...' She caught his eye and felt her voice fade away, the heat tinge her cheeks. 'He'd hardly be likely to understand why you found it necessary to take the afternoon off to come here,' she got out at length.

'It was the only way I could get to see you alone.'

Lisa fought for composure. 'And what made you so certain I would want to see *you* alone?'

He shrugged easily. 'Let's call it intuition plus a little hope. Watching you and Bryn together, I'd say your marriage was about as compatible as mine and Andrea's—though maybe for different reasons. Why did you marry him, Lisa? A girl with your looks can't have been short of offers.'

Her voice sounded thick and heavy in her ears. 'You were right, you are presumptuous! And I think it's time you went.'

'Because I hit too near the truth?' He made no attempt to move. 'Come on, sweetheart, you can relax the pose with me. You're here under duress of some kind, and I aim to find out why and what.'

Lisa gazed at him, unable to summon the anger she knew she should be feeling. 'Why should you be interested?'

The shrug came again, almost with deliberation. 'Call it my crusading instinct. At your age you should be stepping out having fun, not stuck here in this place with a guy like Bryn Venner for a husband. Not that there's one of us doesn't envy him the role. You do appreciate that he's too old for you.'

She said softly, 'You must be around the same age.'

'With the difference that I can remember being unsure of myself, and I doubt if he ever was.'

She could go along with that assessment, but she refused to do so openly. 'Don't you think you should stick to sorting out your own marriage?' she asked on as light a note as she could manage.

'Hardly much point. Andrea and I have a workable arrangement. We keep out of each other's hair.'

'Why bother to stay together at all?'

'Because it suits her book to have a base and mine to have a partner I can fall back on in times of need.' He caught her change of expression and gave a faint smile. 'Don't look so shocked. Two people can be poles apart emotionally and still find one another physically attractive. You should know that.'

She turned away from him, the movement too sharp. 'I'll get you another drink.'

'Don't bother. I'm not going to be here much longer.' He laughed as she glanced back at him. 'Relieved? You didn't think I intended staying till Bryn got back, did you?'

'I'm not sure what you intended.' Her voice was unsteady. 'Just why did you come, Mark?'

'To confirm an impression.' He came to his feet, lean and deceptively lazy, reaching for his slacks regardless of the damp trunks. 'You're no silly little romantic likely to have leapt at your first offer of marriage with your head in the clouds about what life out here might be like, so there has to be some other reason.'

'There could be a very good one,' she said staunchly. 'Like love, for instance.'

The shake of his head was emphatic. 'You're not in love with him. It would be there in the way you look at him if you were. You're the type to let that kind of feeling show through.'

'You take a lot on yourself!'

'Not usually. At least not in the same way.' There was no flippancy now in the tone of his voice, nor in the brown eyes. 'I make it a rule never to get involved beyond a certain depth in anything. You're different. I knew it the first time I set eyes on you.'

'I don't want to be different.' There was an appeal in the swift denial. 'Mark, please leave me alone. I don't want-- you coming here like this again!'

'Okay, I won't. Just so long as you know I'm available any time you need a safety valve.' The thin, good-looking features held a look she found hard to assess. 'I'm not talking about an affair, Lisa. I could get that anywhere.' .

Her smile went beyond her years. 'You mean you just want to be my friend.'

'Yes, if you like.'

She stared at him, unable to deny the small core of warmth stirring in her, yet ashamed of it at the same time. 'We're both married,' she said at last.

'And both to the wrong person.' He put out a hand and lightly touched her cheek with a finger tip. 'You need somebody who can play the fool from time to time—somebody capable of recognising that there's more to life than a job.'

Lisa didn't move away. At that moment she was incapable of it. 'And what do you need?' she heard herself ask.

He smiled. 'Somebody to look up to me, maybe.'

It was a moment before she spoke again. 'I'd never have thought of you as vulnerable that way.'

'We're all vulnerable, one way or another.'

'Including Bryn?'

'Even him—though you might have a devil of a job finding his weak spot.'

Not for the first time, she wondered if he knew his wife had been having an affair with Bryn—might still be having one. Would he even care? By his own admittance he felt nothing for Andrea beyond an occasional physical need she apparently reciprocated. There was a time when such a union, or even the thought of it, would have revolted her, but she was in no position to call down others for something she herself was guilty of. She wasn't in love with Bryn, yet

she had been on the verge of giving herself to him the other night—had already, in fact, done so, and in circumstances far more reprehensible.

Mark finished dressing without haste, taking out his car keys to swing them idly from a finger. 'I parked away from the house. Visitors on foot don't draw as much attention.'

'It hardly matters,' she said. 'I shall have to tell Bryn you called.'

'You won't tell him.' There was quiet confidence in the statement. 'Neither will Mukhtal. It's our secret. It doesn't harm anyone.'

So far, Lisa thought, and knew a swift pang of guilt because what Mark said was true: she would not be telling Bryn about this visit. Yet why should she feel guilty? All she and Mark had done was talk. Could Bryn claim the same with regard to Andrea?

He made no further attempt to touch her in any way. 'Remember what I told you,' he said before departing. 'Any time you feel in need of a little light relief I'll be waiting.'

She made no answer because she couldn't find one. She felt all churned up inside. Our secret, he had said, and she had accepted it. But this was as far as it went. This was as far as it could ever go. She was married to Bryn and she must make the best of it. They both must.

Bryn came home at seven-thirty to find her sitting in darkness in the salon. He switched on a lamp to view her sardonically as she blinked in the sudden spread of light.

'Heavy day?'

She looked at him for a long moment without speaking, taking in the straight cut of his mouth, the tension in his jaw. He looked weary, she thought. As weary as she felt. Now was hardly the time to give him the news she had sat here clutching to herself like a pain for the last hour or so. She wasn't even sure how he would take it.

'Do you want a drink?' she asked, ignoring the question. 'I'll get Mukhtal to bring more ice.'

'Don't bother yet. I need a shower before anything.' He paused. 'We're going out to dinner with the Anders tonight, or had you forgotten?'

'I hadn't. I thought you might have, considering the time.'

'There's no rush. We're not picking them up till nine.' His tone was short. 'If you're intent on feeling sorry for yourself maybe we'd better give it a miss altogether.'

Lisa bit her lip. 'Bryn, don't let's quarrel tonight. Of course I want to go.'

'Quarrel?' His brow lifted. 'Is that what we do?'

'Not with actual words perhaps. There are other ways.' She drew in a steadying breath. 'So far Pam and Dan suspect nothing wrong. You wouldn't like to disillusion them, would you?'

'No. At all costs we must keep up appearances.' The glint in his eyes as he came over to where she sat was unnerving, his hands bruising as he drew her unresistingly to her feet. 'So how about a little effort on your part?'

Lisa closed her eyes as he bent his head to find her mouth, fighting the urge to pull away from him. Right now his touch brought nothing but rejection. She felt trapped, stifled, unable to see beyond the one

bare fact. The words were forced from her the moment he lifted his lips from hers again.

'Bryn, I'm not pregnant.'

Whatever he himself had been about to say was forgotten as he looked at her long and hard. There was an expression in the grey eyes she couldn't fathom, the sudden contraction of a muscle in his jawline.

'So, you're not pregnant,' he said at length. 'What am I supposed to deduce from that statement?'

'I'd have thought it would have been obvious.' Her reply came with bitterness. 'There was no need to marry me after all.'

The hands still on her shoulders tightened momentarily as if he were about to shake her, then abruptly he let her go, turning away to move across and pour himself a stiff drink. He downed half of it in one go before speaking.

'Well, I did,' he said flatly. 'At least on paper. Psychologically speaking, this should work for us, not against us.'

'No,' she jerked out. 'No, it doesn't. Can't you see that? It was the only thing holding us together. You wouldn't have wanted to marry me if the circumstances had been different, would you? I was only meant to be a temporary stand-in for June, not a permanent one. She was the one you wanted to marry.'

His laugh came short and sharp. 'You mean you assumed I did.'

'But you said ...' she began in bewilderment.

'No, I. didn't. I looked June up when I went on leave because I hadn't heard from her for some time and I wanted to make sure she was

okay, but that was all. I was at the church to wish her luck, not bemoan the fact that I wasn't the one standing up there beside her.'

'You called yourself her ex,' she whispered.

'True enough. Ex-correspondent.' His smile held no humour. 'It gave me an opening with you.'

'You mean you followed me out of the church with the intention of trying to pick me up?'

'Not specifically. I'd had enough too. If it hadn't been for that cab nearly sweeping you off your feet, we'd probably have gone our separate ways quite unknowingly. As it was ...' he paused and shrugged ... 'one thing led to another. I was at a loose end and I liked your style. Down but by no means out, that was how you came across.' Irony infiltrated his voice. 'As an act it was pretty convincing— or maybe I just wanted to be convinced.'

'And save yourself the trouble of finding another bed- mate for the night!'

'That wasn't planned either. Not the way you mean.' The shrug came again. 'You'll find few men ready to turn down the kind of come-on you were giving out that night. All right, so maybe I knew it was mostly the result of too many drinks on top of losing the man you really wanted to be in bed with, but I'm not equipped to play the saint in- a situation like that. I wanted you, the opportunity was there, — so I took it.' He looked at the glass in his hand with a twist to his lips. 'Nemesis!'

There was silence for a long moment before he brought his eyes back to her stricken face again, his own expression firming. 'Don't look so tragic. I've told you little beyond what you already know. I made a mistake and I took the only step I could to put things right.'

'Without any need.' She could barely get the words out. 'If you'd waited ...'

'I couldn't wait. And what kind of a louse would you have thought me if I'd been content to anyway?'

'I don't know,' she admitted. Her limbs were trembling so she couldn't keep them still. 'But anything would have been better than this!'

'Do you think it would have improved matters if you really had been pregnant?' he demanded harshly. 'You'd never for one minute have forgotten how it happened. This way we at least stand a chance of starting clear.'

'No!' The denial was passionate. 'I don't want to start clear!'

The lines of his face were set. 'What's the alternative?'

'Annulment,' she said wildly. 'We can have the marriage annulled!'

'''Technically that might prove difficult. The only grounds applicable would be wilful refusal by either party to consummate the marriage. In our case I would have to be the petitioner.' The pause was brief but emphatic. 'No chance.'

'Why?' she shot back. 'Because you'd hate it to be known you couldn't persuade your own wife to give you your rights!'

There was danger in the tensing of his jaw. 'If persuasion won't work you're going to leave me with little choice. We're having neither annulment nor divorce, Lisa, and the sooner you reconcile yourself to that the better. If we both work at it we can make something of it. You were prepared to make the attempt when we took it on.'

'I didn't know you then.'

'And you think you do now?'

The answer came without pause for consideration, needle-sharp and intended to penetrate. 'Not as well as Andrea Farron, perhaps!'

If she had been hoping for a denial of the accusation she was doomed to disappointment. For a moment he just stood there regarding her narrowly, then he said on a measured note, 'What I did with my life before I married you is nothing to do with you.'

Her chin lifted. 'And since?'

The hardness increased. 'What are you getting at?'

'Don't pretend not to know!'

Bryn took a step towards her, then stopped abruptly. 'You're implying there's something going on between us right now?'

Refusing to back down, she said, 'I wouldn't really expect you to admit it. I may be young and inexperienced in these things, Bryn, but I'm not blind, or stupid either! I know you were with her in that bedroom at the O'Rourkes'. I heard you talking!'

'Did you now.' His tone was soft. 'You actually recognised my voice?'

She hesitated. 'Not exactly,' she was forced to admit. 'But I certainly recognised Andrea's!'

'Just a moment.' He held up a staying hand, mouth grim. 'Let me see if I've got this quite straight. You obviously heard a rumour or two while I was down in Serdeles, put two and two together when you heard Andrea with someone in a bedroom and came to the conclusion that it had to be me? Right?'

'I looked for you downstairs,' Lisa defended. 'You were nowhere else to be seen.'

'Did you look outside?' He watched her sudden changing expression with cynicism. 'Well, did you?'

'No.' She felt sick. 'Was ... was that where you were?'

'I don't know. It could have been. I went out several times to get some fresh air. There was about half an hour when I was driving one of the men home to fetch a spare set of keys for his car, having mislaid the others. Round about eleven, that would be.'

Lisa could scarcely bring herself to meet the grey eyes, thankful for the low lighting. 'Bryn, I'm sorry,' she said in subdued tones. 'I jumped to conclusions too quickly.'

'We all do that from time to time,' he returned with surprising forbearance. 'And maybe you had some cause.' He paused, studying her with new intent. 'Lisa, be honest about this. That night when you told me you couldn't bear to have me touch you ... was it really true or were you just reacting to what you suspected me of?'

'I'm not sure.' Her cheeks felt hot. 'I was so mixed up.'

'All right, let's leave it at that for now.' He drained the glass and put it down slowly as if making time to find the right words. 'I have to go away in the morning,' he said at length. 'I'm flying out to Tunis. I'll be gone a couple of days —three at the outside. While I'm gone I want you to do some serious thinking, because when I do come back I'm going to expect to find you prepared to meet me halfway in sorting out the physical side of our relationship at least.'

'Is that all that's important to you?'

He gave her an assessing glance. 'No, but it's a step in the right direction. It just isn't in me to lie night after night with you in the next bed and not want you.' His smile came faint. 'Torment might be good for the soul, but it wreaks havoc with the nervous system. Anyway, one form of closeness can elicit another given the chance.' He eyed her for a moment longer, then put out a hand to add softly, 'Come over here, Lisa.'

She went because she couldn't help herself, aware that the question of Andrea had not been fully banished but recognising the truth also in what he had said. Anything that had happened before Bryn met her was better forgotten. All that really mattered was that she had been wrong about here and now. This time when he kissed her she didn't pull back. The touch of his hands made her quiver.

'That's better,' he said against the corner of her mouth. 'You're warm now and responsive, not fighting it any more. It isn't so difficult, is it?'

'No,' she whispered back. Her heart was hammering, her senses alive to him in a way which left her breathless. 'Bryn, I ...'

'Forget it all for now. We're going to go out tonight and relax with our friends. Wear that blue thing you wore the other night.' He pulled back a little to look at her. 'Feeling up to it?'

'Oh yes.' She was smiling. 'It's like having a weight lifted.'

'I know what you mean. We'll take a leaf out of Dan and Pam's book and concentrate on ourselves for the next couple of years. We've a lot of catching up to do just on getting to know one another.'

In that moment she was close to loving him. These last weeks had been a strain for him too, but because he was a man and hid his emotions she had not stopped to consider them. It would work out for them; she was suddenly certain of it. How could it fail when they both so desperately wanted it to?

CHAPTER FIVE

THE night out was a great success. Back at the Anders' villa after a meal they had all voted excellent, Pam suggested coffee and took Lisa through to the kitchen to help her prepare it, leaving the two men with their brandy and cigars.

'Bet you they're talking shop when we get back,' she said as she got out cups and saucers. 'Rotten luck Bryn having to go away again tomorrow.' She cast an oblique glance in Lisa's direction. 'Not that it seems to be troubling you all that much.'

Lisa laughed. 'There isn't much point in getting worked up about it. It's part of the job.' Her voice took on a softer note. 'Anyway, he'll soon be back.'

'And that makes up for everything. Yes, I can see that. Like having Christmas several times a year!' There was a pause before Pam added on a more sober note, 'You know, there's something different about you two tonight. There's always seemed to be a kind of tension between you before, and now it's gone—or at least, it's nowhere near as pronounced. Getting used to one another?'

Lisa had to smile. 'You see a lot more than you let on.'

'I've been through it myself, that's why. Dan acquired a whole new set of values after we were married. You know what caused our first major row? Toothpaste. I always squeeze the tube from the middle and it drives him up the wall. Don't laugh, I'm serious.'

'Sorry.' Lisa kept a straight face with an effort. 'Did you find a solution?'

'Yes, a tube each.' Sobriety yielded to the humour spilling through. 'Only trouble is I keep forgetting and using his, so now we have two tubes squeezed from the middle!'

Both men looked up curiously when they took through the coffee. 'You seemed to be having a hilarious time in there,' Dan commented. 'Going to share the joke?'

'You wouldn't appreciate it,' Pam told him. 'Anyway, we're entitled to our secrets.'

Lisa caught Bryn's eye and hoped he didn't think they had been discussing anything to do with their marriage. His smile reassured her. He looked relaxed. On impulse, she went to sit beside him, needing his closeness in a way she had never needed it before. This big, vital man was her husband and he wanted her physically if not as yet in a deeper sense. That much she could give him and would do so without reservation come the time. Yet in some obscure sense she was glad of this few days' respite before committing herself so wholly into his care. It gave her the chance to come to terms with her own inner self.

They left about twelve-thirty to drive home through the hot, singing darkness. For the first time, Lisa found herself able to face the solitude of their bedroom without dread, although not quite enough to relinquish her habit of undressing in the bathroom.

Bryn was standing out on the balcony as he had been that first night when she went back to the room. He slid open the screen and beckoned her out beside him, slipping an arm about her shoulders to draw her closer to the balustrade and keeping it there as they stood side by side looking out over the other rooftops towards the sea.

'Think you can take two years of this?' he asked on a low note which carried an element she was not all that sure of. 'I know it can't be easy for a woman stuck here with nothing to do all day but talk to other women. Especially not at your age. You should still be playing the field— having a good time. Do you miss your old haunts?'

'In some ways,' she was forced to admit. 'Not that it was ever as frenetic as you seem to think.'

'You must have had plenty of boy-friends.'

'One or two. Nothing serious.'

'Until Mark Williams?'

'Well, yes, I suppose so.' She was surprised by how little the name affected her. 'Only I think the seriousness was all on my side. Mark saw me just as a girl to take out, to pass the time with.'

'Did he try to make love to you?'

It was a moment before she replied. 'Yes,' she said at last.

'Did you want him to make love to you?'

'Yes, but...' ,

'You don't have to start finding excuses. It's a perfectly natural feeling.' He paused before adding softly, 'Half your trouble is that you still basically believe a man despises a girl who allows lovemaking outside of marriage. Perhaps he does too where she's promiscuous—even though he'll take advantage of it anyway—but it's different with someone like you. I might have taken it that you'd had some experience before I came along, but it never occurred to me to think of you as easy.'

Lisa swallowed tightly on the lump in her throat. 'Not even when I just went along with everything you wanted within a few hours of meeting you for the first time?'

His smile came slowly. 'I didn't see it like that. All I remember is the tremendous boost it gives a man to know he's arousing a woman he

wants. All right, there were other factors involved, and I knew it, only they wouldn't have been enough on their own, and I knew that too.'

There was a fascination in talking like this in such quiet intimacy—a warmth. Lisa didn't want him to stop. 'You must have received an awful shock when you ... realised,' she said with diffidence.

'Surprise, maybe—gratification for sure.' His voice took on a faint wry note. 'It wasn't until later that the implications started to hit me. You'd given me something you could never regain, and no way was I going to be able to put that out of mind. Seeing you lying there in my bed with your hair down and your make-up mostly off, I couldn't even persuade myself you were old enough to take care of yourself any more. Marriage had to be the solution under the circumstances.'

Lisa stared down at her two hands clasped tightly together on the stonework. She said huskily, 'It was all my fault.'

'No, it's mine if anyone's. Not that it's relevant now anyway. We're going to build a worthwhile relationship out of this, Lisa. We've all the time in the world to do it in.' His hand was at her nape, gently caressing the hollow beneath the heaviness of her hair. 'You're a very lovely girl and I'm very lucky to have you for my wife.'

'But I'm not what you'd have chosen if you'd had an open choice,' she made herself say.

His shrug was light. 'I'm not even sure I'd have married at all, given an open choice.'

'That's not what I said.'

'I know it isn't.' He hesitated, obviously torn between honesty and tact. 'All right,' he said at last, 'so I daresay you're not exactly what I imagined when I thought about taking a wife at all. You're too young for me, and I'm not exactly renowned for tolerance in most quarters.'

But youth is, something you'll grow out of—probably all too quickly—and it won't do me any harm to pace myself alongside you.'

'No!' It came out sharper than she intended, her whole body tensed. She felt the reaction in him and forced a calmer note. 'No, Bryn, I don't want you doing that. If we're going to make a success of living together then I have to start growing up as of now. I—I realise I can't possibly age four or five years overnight, but if you treat me as if I had it would help. Twenty isn't so very young, you know. It only seems so because you can't remember being that age yourself.'

'I can,' he said. 'And believe me, it wasn't any way the same.' He drew her round towards him, holding her there to study her face in the shadowed light. 'You want to be treated like a woman, is that what you're saying?'

She met his eyes without flinching. 'Yes.'

His smile was faint. 'Are you sure you know what the difference is—or even that there is a difference?'

'Yes,' she said again. 'To both questions.' Her heart was thudding like a trip hammer, but she refused to back away from things now. 'I'll be waiting for you when you get back from Tunis, and I shan't be expecting you to start handling me with kid gloves again.'

'Did I ever do that?' He looked down at her for another long moment, then something altered subtly in his expression. 'I'll bear the thought in mind,' he promised. The smile came again, slowly. 'It's going to be a long three days.'

He was gone when she awoke, with only the indentation left by his head on the pillow to tell her he had been there at all. Seen from this end, three days seemed like a lifetime. So let it be part of one, she thought. Let him come home to a wife willing and ready to take her place in his scheme of things—one he could be proud of. Given time

and opportunity, love could grow between two people. Perhaps not with quite the same overruling passion some couples were fortunate enough to experience, but real and true nevertheless.

On impulse, she rang round the girls and invited them all over for coffee and a swim, along with the children too. Pam was the first to arrive, wrinkling her nose when she realised what kind of party it was going to be.

'You're a glutton for punishment,' she said. 'Thank God Marjorie's two are both at school. Not that it'll stop her talking about them.'

'She's' no worse than anyone else,' Lisa defended mildly. 'And it's easy enough to change the subject. We may find ourselves boring everybody else to death one of these fine days.'

'The difference being that our kids will merit the build-up, like I said before.' Pam's grin was unrepentant. 'No use trying to sweeten my basic nature. I hate self-sacrifice. I'll bury myself in a book and leave you to bear the brunt if the going gets too rough.'

Lisa grinned back. 'Some friend!'

With four toddlers between the ages of two and four around the morning could hardly be less than slightly fraught. True to her word, Pam found a book and stuck her nose firmly into it after an hour or so, refusing to emerge until lunch was brought out by an ever willing Mukhtal.

'I thought you said coffee?' she murmured *sotto voce* to Lisa as they helped themselves to the pasties filled with eggs and cheese freshly cooked that morning by Hawa. 'Mmmm ... aren't these just gorgeous. Try one with that red pepper sauce. Lucky devil to have food like this every day. Bryn must have been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Everything just falls into his lap!'

She stayed on for a while after the others finally left, sure of her welcome in a way Lisa liked.

'Dan said to ask you over,' she remarked casually at one point. 'Feel like taking him up on it?'

Lisa smiled and shook her head. 'I was over last night with Bryn. Time you had a night on your own. I've got some sewing to do. I'm making myself a long skirt out of a dress I don't care for any more.'

'I don't see much point when you could just go out and buy one,' came the typical reply.

'I don't like seeing things go to waste, that's all.'

'And it's something to do these lonely evenings while Bryn's away.' The other's glance was shrewd. 'I hope he realises just how lucky he is.' She didn't wait for any answer to that, going straight on, 'Incidentally, you could start thinking about taking your turn with the weekend entertainment now that you're settled. Bryn can't wriggle out of it now he's no longer a bachelor.'

'All right,' Lisa agreed readily. 'When will it be my turn?'

The gamine grin sprang into being. 'How about this weekend? Andrea may not be back in time to take hers.'

A small pulse throbbed suddenly at Lisa's temple. 'Back?'

'She goes off on her own from time to time. No one knows where—including Mark, I'd say. You'd think he'd want to do something about it, wouldn't you?'

'They each prefer to go their own way.' Lisa was trying to keep any creeping suspicion at bay. It was sheer coincidence that Andrea had chosen to absent herself at this particular time. It had to be.

Pam was looking at her with an odd expression. 'You seem to know a lot about it.'

'Mark told me. He was here yesterday afternoon when I got back from the beach.' She stopped there abruptly, too well aware of having said more than she intended.

'Was he though!' Pam sounded suddenly speculative. 'I don't imagine Bryn took very kindly to *that* idea.' She caught Lisa's swiftly averted glance and lifted an eyebrow. 'You don't mean you didn't tell him?'

'He didn't stay more than a few minutes.' There was a defensive note in her voice and she knew Pam had registered it. 'There was nothing to tell.'

'Show me the man likely to see it that way!' Pam shook her head. 'Look, tell me to mind my own business, if you like, but Mark Farron isn't the type to simply drop in on a casual visit with no other motive in mind. We all saw him so obviously fancying you your first weekend here. In fact, nobody could-understand why Bryn let him monopolise you that way.' Her gaze flickered. 'They're not what I'd call great buddies, those two.'

'Which is why I didn't tell him he'd been here,' Lisa said. Her jaw felt stiff. 'He won't be coming again—I made sure of that. I'm perfectly capable of handling someone like Mark Farron!'

'Okay, I believe you.' Pam held up her hands in mock defence. 'If you flashed at him like that I should think he was glad to get away unscathed!'

'Sorry.' Lisa was genuinely penitent. 'I didn't mean to shout. It's just that I get a bit tired sometimes of being ... looked after. I might be the youngest adult in our particular community, but that doesn't make me any less able to take care of myself. Honestly, Pam, there's nothing to worry about. And nothing for Bryn to worry about either.'

'Oh, don't think I might feel tempted to tell him. I draw the line at interfering between husband and wife.' Pam glanced at her watch. 'Look, I shall have to go. I'll give you a ring in the morning, okay?'

'Yes, fine.' Lisa wished suddenly that she had accepted the offer of dinner over at the Anders' villa; she didn't want to be alone. But it was too late now.

She took herself sharply to task after the other girl had gone. Trust was something she was going to have to learn if she wanted to be happy with Bryn. Whatever might have been between him and Andrea Farron in the past, he had been a bachelor then without responsibility to anyone but himself. The man who had talked to her out there on the balcony last night wouldn't let her down. He meant every word, she was certain of that.

Darkness fell with its customary swiftness, sharpening her sense of isolation. Hawa had cooked her favourite *doulma*, but tonight even the tender, stuffed courgette could not tempt her appetite. Afterwards she tried to settle down to finish a book she had begun the previous week, but the words refused to make sense.

Eventually she could stave off the urge no longer. The Farrons' number-was on the list Pam had given her some days before. She dialled it with a finger that trembled, not even sure what she was going to say if and when it was answered.

The receiver was lifted almost immediately as though whoever was on the other end had been sitting right beside it. Mark's voice held a lazy inflection. 'Farron here.'

'Hallo, Mark,' she said on a bright note. 'I hear you're all alone too!'

There was a lengthy pause before he answered. When he did speak his voice sounded different. 'Bryn left you a grass widow again, did he? When did he go?'

'This morning, to Tunis for three days.' She tried to keep her tone light. 'Where did Andrea go?'

'I'm not sure. She doesn't tell me her plans, and I don't ask.'

'She's your wife. Surely you have a right to know where she is!'

'I told you the situation. We're both our own boss.' This time the pause was briefer. 'Lisa, are you thinking what you seem to be suggesting?'

'No!' Her voice came out too sharp. 'That's ridiculous.'

'So ridiculous you know exactly what I was getting at?' His tone firmed. 'I'm coming over.' He put the receiver down before she could find breath or will to protest.

She was waiting to open the door the moment she heard the car, reluctant to have Mukhtal come through from the back and see her visitor.

'You shouldn't be here,' she said as Mark reached her. 'I didn't ask you to come!'

'You obviously needed somebody,' he said. 'And if I'm involved too then I'm the obvious choice.' He turned her round and urged her gendy ahead of him back inside, closing the outer door quietly and indicating the salon. 'I think we could both use a drink.'

She let him fix them, took a small sip from her glass and put it down again with a shake of her head. 'I tried that once before and look where it got me. I'm being an idiot about this whole business.' There was appeal in the gaze she lifted to the man standing opposite. 'Aren't I?'

'I don't know,' he said, and hesitated. 'I don't know what you're basing your suspicions on. Gossip runs riot in a set-up like this one.'

'Not without some kind of foundation in fact.' She took a long slow breath, conscious of betrayal even as she said it. 'As you so obviously couldn't care less what Andrea gets up to, I can tell you that Bryn admitted to having had an affair with her during the time you've all been here in Tripoli.'

'Did he though?' Mark sounded surprised but not in any way shaken. 'Honest of him.'

'You knew about it?'

'I knew about it.' His shrug held indifference. 'If it hadn't been him it would have been someone else.'

'How could you let her?' she burst out with violence, and saw his faint smile.

'How could I stop her? A divorce would probably cost me a good proportion of my income in settlement without gaining me any significant advantage.' He paused, twisting the glass in his hand with that same wry tilt to his lips. 'There was a time when I thought she might be going to ask me for one, but you put paid to that.'

Something inside Lisa died a slow death. Her voice was low and strained. 'You mean Bryn wanted to marry your wife?'

'I've no idea what Bryn wanted, I only know Andrea had the shock of her life when he turned up with you in tow. It was a shock for everybody, come to that. He never seemed the type to fall for somebody as ...'

'Lacking in sophistication as me,'" she finished for him with bitterness. 'You're right, he isn't.'

'Then what...'

'I don't want to talk about it.' Her limbs felt cold. 'Mark, you've a good idea where she's gone, haven't you? Don't lie to me ... please!'

His shoulders lifted in a gesture of resignation. 'She took her passport, so she must be planning on crossing the border. There's one way of checking if she's with Bryn.'

'Which way?'

'Phone him. Our people always use the same hotel in Tunis. They'd put you straight through to his room.'

Lisa sought for some excuse, not even sure why she needed one. 'He might not be there at this time of night.'

'It's only just after eight-thirty. I'd say he'll be changing for dinner about now.'

Still she hesitated, staring at him like a rabbit stares •mesmerised at a snake. 'But what would it prove anyway, if I did speak to him? He's hardly likely to tell me he's not alone.'

'You'll know.' Mark spoke with wry certainty. 'Wives always do. Some inbred instinct, or maybe it's just simple guilt on the man's part that comes through in his manner.' He studied her a moment before adding softly, 'Shall I get you the connection?'

Lisa didn't answer. She felt numbed right through. She watched Mark move across to the telephone and lift the receiver, heard him speak to the operator and saw him put a hand over the mouthpiece as he looked back at her. 'We're in luck, it's a clear line straight through. Are you coming?'

Somehow she found herself by his side and taking the instrument from him, heard the buzzing of static on the line mingling with the sharper double burr. Then there was a click and a strongly accented

voice came on giving the name of the hotel followed by something else in Arabic she couldn't understand. Lisa spoke in English:

'Mr. Venner's room, please.'

Still more than half anticipating being told that Mr Venner was out, she found herself clutching tightly hold of the receiver when another click signified an answer from the extension. The voice which came down the line was low and husky and unmistakably female: 'Aywa?'

Lisa put the receiver back in its rest like an automaton, her mind refusing to function beyond this point. Mark took her by an arm as she continued to stand there without moving, turning her towards him. His face was questioning.

'Well?' he asked.

'She's there.' Lisa was surprised by her own calmness. 'She answered the phone.'

'Oh, God, I'm sorry.' He sounded genuinely distressed. 'I shouldn't have suggested it.'

'No, I'm glad you did. I'd rather be certain than spend the next three days wondering.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I don't know.' It was true, she didn't know—couldn't even begin to think. Bryn was a liar and a cheat and when she got round to feeling anything again about him it was going to be hate. 'I think I will have that drink, after all,' she said.

Mark sat and watched her force down half of it before reaching out to take the glass from her.

'You said you'd tried that once before,' he reminded her. 'Obviously it didn't work then either.'

'It did. Only too well.' Her laugh was brittle. 'How do you think I got myself into this mess in the first place?'

Enlightenment dawned suddenly in the brown eyes. 'You mean Bryn married you because you'd let him make love to you?'

'Noble of him, wasn't it? Especially considering he knew nothing about me!'

He shook his head. 'I don't understand. He was writing to you, wasn't he? At least, so I understood from the grapevine. Even minor items like that achieve some interest in a close community,' the last on a dry note.

'That wasn't me, it was another girl.' Her chest ached. 'He picked me up at her wedding and we spent that same night together. He only married me because he was afraid I might finish up in a home for unmarried mothers otherwise.'

Mark wore an odd expression. 'And are you?' he asked softly.

'No.' For the first time it came home to her just what she was letting out in these moments of distress. She made a sudden despairing little gesture. 'I shouldn't be telling you all this. It's between me and Bryn, no one else.'

'He let you down, why should you feel bound to keep faith?' He caught her hand and clasped it loosely in his own on the divan between them. 'You know, in some respects a man can be a better confidant than another woman. Whatever you've told me stops right here, Lisa. You can rest easy about that. I'm glad you found yourself able to call on me tonight.'

'You were the only one who could tell me where Andrea was,' she said. 'I had to know the truth, one way or another, even if I finished up ashamed of myself because I hadn't trusted him more.'

'Well, you certainly don't have to do that.' He paused, studying her. 'How do you feel about him now?'

'I despise him!' She said it with fierceness. Her eyes came up to search his, lit by anger and pain. 'It's your wife who's with him, Mark. Don't you feel anything?' -

He shook his head. 'I stopped feeling anything in that sense a long time ago. It's only now when it involves someone like you that it can get to me. Bryn's responsibilities didn't stop at the altar. You deserve a better deal than the one you're getting.'

Did she, though? she wondered numbly. She should have refused to marry Bryn from the start; he couldn't have forced her into it. A man of his kind needed his freedom too desperately to give it up altogether; she should have known that too. Yet how could he bring himself to say the things he had said to her last night knowing all the time that they meant nothing? How could he hope to build any "kind of life for the two of them on a foundation of lies and deceit? What he had done in marrying her at all under these conditions was far, far worse than if he had simply left her flat to cope with any possible results of her own stupidity.

'If I had enough money,' she said, 'I'd be on the first plane home in the morning!'

It was a moment before Mark answered. 'Money's no problem, but I think you ought to stay.'

'For what?'

'To confront him with it, for one thing. Anyway, I doubt if he'd just let you go like that. Not after bringing you all the way out here in the first place. He'd come after you.'

'He couldn't force me to come back with him.'

'I daresay not. What would you do on your own in England?'

'What I did before—I'd get a job. After that I'd consult a solicitor.'

'Divorce can be a long-drawn-out process.'

'How about annulment?'

His eyebrows lifted. 'Do you have grounds?'

'I... I'm not sure.' The spirit went out of her suddenly, leaving her flat. 'Mark, how can I stay with him after this? If I didn't love him before I at least respected him. Now all I feel is disgust. Nobody takes marriage vows seriously any more. My own parents found themselves other partners while they were still married.'

'Don't knock it,' he said. 'It can't always work out like the book says. I married Andrea believing we were going to be together for all time.'

'Till you found out what kind of person she was.'

'Till I found out what kind of people we both were. If it takes two to make a marriage you can say more often than not it takes two to finish it. We each wanted something the other couldn't provide. The mistake we made was in not acknowledging that fact before we took the step.'

Lisa was silent for a time, her mind going over what he had said. 'Yesterday, when you came to see me,' she said at last, 'did you really have no ulterior motive?'

'I tried to tell myself I hadn't, just like I tried to tell you.' His smile was rueful. 'The truth is I couldn't stay away.'

'Because you saw me as a way of getting back at Bryn?'

'On the exchange is no robbery basis? No, I don't think so.' He looked back at her steadily. 'Whatever the motive it wasn't meant to harm you. You brought a breath of fresh air into this sordid little world of ours.'

'That's rather a hard term to use.'

'Is it? You might be surprised. Groups thrown together the way ours is tend to lose sight of demarcation lines.'

'I think I'd rather not know.' Her voice had a tremor in it. 'My staying with Bryn isn't going to benefit you in any way.'

'For once in my life it isn't me I'm most interested in. You've got to stay for your own sake. If you run away from this thing now you'll always regret it. Personally, I don't think you're sure *how* you really feel about Bryn.'

'I'm sure. I hate him!'

'Which means he's hurt you. If he can do that you're emotionally involved—you have to be. Andrea can't hurt me because we're not any more. The day you can register the same indifference then you'll be free of him.'

'I wish,' she said on a low note, 'that I'd married someone like you, Mark.'

'So do I.' He touched her face the way he had the day before, expression revealing. 'I'd earn your respect as well as your love, Lisa, and think myself lucky to have the chance?'

She made no move to avoid him when he bent to kiss her, needing some kind of mental block, no matter how temporary. Compared with Bryn's, his touch did little to stir her, but that kind of stimulation was not what she was looking for right now. She clung to him with a kind of desperation, burying her face against his chest when he reluctantly lifted his head.

'I'm sorry,' she said in a muffled voice. 'I'm not being fair.'

'No, you're not,' he agreed, stroking her hair, 'but who's grumbling?' His tone altered a little. 'Lisa, I can take some time off this next couple of days. Will you let me take you out to Sabratha tomorrow? You can't just sit around here waiting for Saturday to come.'

'I'm putting on the weekend party in lieu of Andrea,' she said after a moment. She sat up straight, hand going automatically to her hair, eyes avoiding his. 'I'll need time to organise that.'

'Not a lot. Hawa. only needs telling how many will be coming.'

'Nobody knows about the change of plan yet. Pam only asked me this afternoon.'

'Well then, she'll be passing the word around.' Mark smiled. 'Don't worry, nobody is going to get left out when it gets out that Hawa is doing the cooking. She's renowned for her *hlalims* and *kaftaji dejari*.' He grinned briefly at the look on her face. 'Meatballs in English. How about it? Will you come? You need the distraction.'

Lisa couldn't argue with that. The thought of spending the next two days considering what she was going to say to Bryn on his return went beyond reason. 'All right,' she said recklessly, 'I'll come. And thanks for the thought, Mark.'

'It's the least I can do, considering.' He got to his feet, looking down at her for a moment with a certain indecision. 'Take a couple of aspirin

and try and get some sleep. Worrying about things doesn't help solve the problem. I'll pick you up at seven while it's still cool enough to enjoy the drive. We can have lunch at Sabratha after we've seen the ruins, then carry on to Zwara if we've time and perhaps have a swim. There's some wonderful beaches round that area. Don't bother about seeing me out. I know the way.'

It wasn't until he had finally gone that Lisa allowed herself to consider what might be her real motives for agreeing to accompany him next day. Poetic justice came into them, she acknowledged with a sense of shame not quite strong enough to bring retreat. Mark had put it apdy enough; exchange was no robbery. Let Bryn know what it felt like to share too, even if it wasn't to the same extent.

CHAPTER SIX

THERE were times during those following two days when Lisa was able to forget the circumstances of her being with Mark at all in the sheer enjoyment of his companionship. Viewing the ruins at Sabratha together, swimming in the sea, eating the picnic meals packed for them by Hawa, there was no sense of awkwardness between them. Neither Bryn nor Andrea were ever once mentioned by name.

It was Friday afternoon before Lisa allowed herself to begin worrying about Bryn's homecoming the following morning. They had driven out to Tarhuna along the coastal road, and from there inland to the oasis town of Beni Walid for a belated lunch right on the edge of the pre-desert. That far from the coast the heat was unbearable. By common consent they had stayed within the cooler confines of the hotel where they had eaten until the sun had sunk low enough to make driving back to Tripoli a feasible proposition.

It was dark before they reached the city, the night air pleasant after the sticky heat of the day. Mark put down the windows and let the breeze of their passage fill the vehicle, smiling when Lisa lifted the hair at her nape to let the air circulate behind.

'I'd like to photograph you like that,' he said, eyes lingering on the thrust of her breasts through the fine cotton of her shirt as she leaned back with a blissful sigh. 'The freedom of the young! You have a beautiful body, Lisa.'

She dropped her arms with sudden abruptness, self-conscious under his glance. 'I didn't realise you were interested in photography.'

'I am when the subject matter merits it. I've rather exhausted the potential where Arabs and things Arabic are concerned.' His tone altered subtly. 'I enjoyed these last two days.'

'So did I.' Her own tone was flat.

There was a pause before he said, 'Have you thought about what you're going to do when Bryn gets back?'

'Yes,' she said, 'but not with any far-reaching conclusions. If I accuse him he'll probably deny it.'

'Still hate him?'

Lisa shook her head. 'I don't feel anything for him. My pride was hurt the other night, that's all. If he came back tomorrow and told me he wanted his freedom I'd be relieved.'

'I don't somehow think he's likely to do that.'

'Then I'll have to ask for mine.' Lisa wished she felt as confident as she sounded. 'He can't make me stay with him.'

Mark said softly, 'If I were him I'd certainly do my utmost.'

'Even if you had another woman?'

'I told you, he's just using Andrea. My wife is the kind of woman most men would like to have but only a fool would want to marry.'

She looked at him then. 'You can say that now perhaps, but surely you felt differently six years ago?'

'Naturally. I knew I wasn't the first, but I had enough confidence in myself to believe I could satisfy her.' He spoke unemotionally. 'What I didn't realise was that for Andrea' there has to be a challenge constantly ahead. Once she has a man well and truly hooked she starts losing interest. By marrying you, Bryn set himself up as the biggest challenge of all. She'll not be satisfied until she's broken it up.'

'She can have him now for me!' Lisa jerked out through stiff lips. 'I think they just about deserve one another!' She broke off, made a

small gesture that was half apology. 'Sorry, Mark, she's still your wife.'

'And you can't understand why.' The shrug was brief. 'We were living apart most of the time when this job came up. There was me and this other guy, both with equal qualifications, only he was a bachelor. The Company made it clear that the job was mine on the strength of having a wife to bring out with me.'

'And Andrea agreed to come, just like that?'

'She was bored enough with life at the time to see potential in any change. Bryn was already here when we arrived—just the sort of target she most liked. The game has to be worth the candle, you see.'

'How long was it going on before I came on the scene?' Lisa asked, low-toned.

'You mean as a full-blown affair?' He shook his head. 'I couldn't tell you the first time they slept together or anything like that. I only know she didn't succeed in making him declare himself to her any way.'

'How?'

'Because she made no attempt to start looking round for new blood.'

'You knew what was going on ...' the words burst from her ... 'yet you still carried on sleeping with her yourself! Mark, how *could* you?'

His glance was wry. 'It would take another man to understand. It's a totally physical thing, Lisa—for both of us. In that way if not in any other we were always good together. What would you suggest as an alternative—taking a leaf out of her own book and having an affair with somebody else's wife? The only European women out here are all married, you know, and I don't personally feel attracted to the few liberated Libyan women around.' He seemed to sense the quality in

her silence and gave a small dry smile. 'I'm thirty years old and normally adjusted, and three years is a hell of a long time. Don't condemn what you've never experienced.'

'I'm trying not to,' she said thickly. 'I really am.' The pause held weight. 'Will you still ... want her that way when she gets back?'

'Probably. I can only be honest about it. Whether I'll be doing anything about it is something else again.' He steered suddenly into the side of the roadway and brought the car to a stop, reaching out to switch off the ignition. Silence grew about them, emphasised by the almost unbroken darkness of the surrounding landscape. Without the movement of air through the car the heat seemed to settle like a mantle.

'You make a difference,' he said at length without looking at her. 'What you think of me has to be more important than a little physical frustration. You're young, you have ideals and you want a man who can live up to them.'

'Who'll *try* to live up to them, perhaps.' Her head was bent, her hands tight clasped in her lap. 'Nobody is perfect. I wouldn't expect them to be.'

'You would, but that's beside the point.' He reached for her, drawing her round to face him, eyes warm with a light that contracted her heart. 'Lisa, right now I want desperately to make love to you, more than I've ever wanted anything. But I'm not going to risk spoiling a relationship I've come to value so highly these last two days.' His thumb traced the line of her mouth, pausing at the corner as he felt her quiver. When he kissed her she neither responded nor moved away, just sat there quiescent under his touch waiting for him to stop.

'I'm sorry,' she said on a note of desperation when he finally sat back again. 'It isn't that I don't like you, Mark...'

'But you're still married to Bryn and that makes any kind of intimacy between us outside the rules,' he finished for her wryly. 'All right, I shouldn't have touched you at all after what I just said, and I can't blame you for feeling reluctant to trust me. But you can trust me, Lisa. I wouldn't hurt you for anything. I won't even try to kiss you again until you're ready to let me.'

'I ... don't know when that will be.' She felt a faint tremor run through her. 'Mark, I ...'

'I'll wait.' He said it quietly but with obvious intent. 'I'll wait as long as it takes for you to finish with Bryn. If you want me to I'll even come back to England with you if you decide to go.'

'And give up your job?'

'Yes.'

She could scarcely believe him, but the offer alone was almost enough. 'We'd better get back,' she said after a long moment. 'It's late.'

He put the car into motion again without protest.

Pam came over soon after nine the next morning, ostensibly to lend Lisa a hand in preparing for the evening, although with Hawa taking care of the catering it was scarcely necessary. She waited until they were having coffee at the poolside before stating what was on her mind.

'Rumour has it you've been seeing Mark Farron while Bryn's been away,' she said bluntly. 'Is it true?'

Lisa didn't lift her eyes from their contemplation of the still water. 'Yes.'

'But *why*?' The question held genuine bewilderment. 'The other night you seemed so happy with Bryn.'

'I was ... then.'

'You mean something happened before he went away to change things?'

'Not before. After.' Lisa paused, aware of the other's concern and reluctant to go on. Yet what other explanation of her behaviour could she give? Nothing, certainly, that Pam might be expected to understand. 'You remember mentioning that Andrea had left town too?' she asked without giving herself time for further consideration.

'Yes, but ...' Pam broke off and caught her lower lip between her teeth. 'Oh, come on, Lisa, that was just sheer coincidence! Andrea often goes off like that.'

'So does Bryn. I wonder just how many times they've managed to coincide in the past?' Green eyes came round to meet hazel, registering the latter's swift flicker. 'You're not going to try telling me you didn't know about the two of them? Dan knows.'

'He told you that?'

'He didn't need to tell me. He got all edgy when I mentioned her name in connection with Bryn.'

'That's reading a lot into a little, isn't it?'

'No, it isn't,' Lisa came back flatly. 'Anyway, Bryn already admitted it.'

'Oh?' Pam sounded totally taken aback. She rallied with an effort. 'Well, all-right, so I knew. But that was ages ago. I'm quite sure he wouldn't have anything to do with Andrea Farron now.'

'Because he married me?' The laugh was brittle. *Tom* supposed to be the innocent around here! Pam, I've got proof it's still going on.'

'What kind of proof?'

'I phoned the hotel in Tunis. Andrea answered, from his room.'

The silence was lengthy. 'Are you sure it was Andrea?' Pam said at last.

'Would it make things better if it had been another woman?' Lisa swallowed. 'Yes, I'm sure. She has a very distinctive voice even when she's speaking Arabic.'

'She doesn't speak Arabic so far as I know.'

'There was just one word. It makes no difference. I know I didn't make any mistake.'

'You might give Bryn chance to speak for himself before convicting him.'

'There's nothing he can say that's going to alter the truth.'

'Meaning you're not prepared to believe any explanation he might have.'

Lisa turned a fierce glance on her. 'What possible explanation *could* there be except the obvious one? They arranged to meet in Tunis. It's as simple as that!'

Pam shook her head stubbornly. 'I refuse to believe he'd do a thing like this.'

'You don't know him!'

'I'd be willing to bet I know him better than you do.' She was sitting bolt upright on the edge of her chair, eyes angry. 'If you didn't have any trust in him you shouldn't have married him in the first place! You were writing to one another long enough.'

Lisa bit back the words trembling on her lips. She had gone far enough without letting out any more. Her own anger died as she looked across at the older girl. 'Pam, I don't want to quarrel with you. Can we just forget it for now.'

'Of course we can't forget it.' But her tone was softer, the hazel eyes worried. 'Lisa, I wish I could help. What are you going to do?'

'I don't know. I shan't know until I see him, I expect.'

'I still think you should give him a chance to explain. You could have made a mistake, you know. It could have been a maid speaking. One word isn't a lot to go on.'

Lisa held her gaze for a moment, her own bleak. 'I'd like to think you were right.'

'Then hold your horses until I'm proved wrong. If it's true he might feel bound to admit it.'

'After which I forgive him because men can't help being what they are, I suppose?'

Pam's mouth thinned. 'That sounds more like Mark Farron talking than you. Trust him to take advantage of a situation! Can't you see what he's after?'

'I can only see that you all of you take him entirely at face value,' Lisa defended swiftly. 'Mark hasn't taken advantage of any situation. He simply happens to feel bad because it's his wife involved.'

'If he feels so bad about it he should have put in his oar before this. He couldn't care less what Andrea gets up to.'

'He does when it affects me.'

'Oh, I see. That's his line, is it? And I suppose he'll not be ready and waiting with open arms if you run out on Bryn?'

Lisa bit her lip. 'I don't think there's much point in going on with this. We obviously see people from totally different angles.'

'Obviously.' There was a pause while Pam studied her, then she sighed. 'What's the use? Is he coming here tonight?'

'I've no idea. I didn't ask.'

'If he's any sense he'll stay clear until you and Bryn have sorted yourselves out. Someone is bound to let it out that you've been seen together.' She shoot her head at the faint change of expression on Lisa's face. 'No, not me. I'd rather not even be in the vicinity when he does find out.'

'He can hardly complain.'

'So you say. I wouldn't like to take any bets on it. In eleven months I've only once seen Bryn get really mad, but he certainly didn't stop to work out the pros and cons that time. If Mark is around at the time he'll go for him. Serve him right too.'

Recalling the moments of anger she herself had experienced in Bryn, Lisa had to agree with the first statement if not with the second. She hoped Mark would have the sense not to turn up. For herself she didn't care. There was no way Bryn could get round the fact she would fling in his face in front of everyone if he dared to say a word to her.

He came home only twenty minutes or so before guests were due to start arriving, offering a brief word of apology before going up to change his clothing.

'One of those things,' he said. 'Something cropped up just before I was due to leave this morning. I didn't realise it was our turn to hold open house.'

'It wasn't,' she said? looking him in the eye. 'It should have been the Farrons'.' Had the greyness flickered for a moment? She couldn't be sure. 'I had Mukhtal rig up the stereo speakers out by the pool for dancing. Is that all right?'

'Whatever you think. You're the hostess.' He touched her cheek with a finger tip, expression quizzical. 'Not nervous of the crowd, are you?'

'No.' She resisted the urge to draw away from him with an effort. 'They're only people. Is that a car now?'

It wasn't, but he took the hint. 'Give me ten minutes.'

Pam and Dan were the first to arrive. Lisa avoided the former's questioning glance, smiling up at Dan. 'You know where everything is, would you like to fix your own drinks? I'm not very good at it. Bryn will be down in a minute—he only just got back.'

'Typical,' Dan commented, moving to comply. 'Half the weekend gone and no compensation!'

'Never mind,' she came back brightly. 'I'm sure he'll make up for it tonight.'

People came thick and fast after that, filling the place with chatter and laughter. Bryn reappeared, dressed comfortably and coolly in light slacks and a knitted cotton shirt. Lisa made no attempt to go near him.

By ten-thirty she was pretty sure neither of the Farrons were going to turn up. Perhaps even Andrea had her limitations, she thought cynically. Hawa's preparations were greeted with enthusiastic delight. Sated, people drifted back to dancing, to talking, falling into the inevitable groups as the evening progressed. Lisa wished she could slip away to bed. Her head ached with a dull throbbing aspirin didn't touch.

It was gone midnight before she became aware of any difference in Bryn's demeanour. Even then she couldn't be certain that the brusqueness she sensed in him was not just the product of an overlong day. People began leaving round about one. By half past only a small hard core was left to drink the coffee Lisa made herself, having told Mukhtal to go to bed.

'Great party,' somebody said. 'Roll on the next time!'

Pam perched on the arm of Lisa's chair, coffee cup balanced in her hand. 'You look just about all in,' she murmured. 'Soon as they've finished coffee I'll start the ball rolling for a general exodus.'

Don't go, Lisa wanted to beg. Don't leave me alone with Bryn. She could sense he was looking her way from across the room but couldn't bring herself to turn her head towards him. Deliberately she stiffened her backbone. So what if he had been told about her and Mark? She had done nothing wrong. Nothing he could set against his own exploits?

First to arrive, the Anders were the last to leave after Pam had firmly seen off the others before her. Lisa watched Bryn close the big, solid door and slip the bolts, nerving herself to stand her ground as he turned towards her. He had been holding back for this moment; she knew that now. The glitter in his eyes was evidence enough of his anger.

'Is it true?' he demanded.

Lisa made no attempt to prevaricate by asking if what was true. She said levelly, 'That rather depends on what you've been told.'

His breath came out on a clearly audible sound. 'I've been told you've been seeing Mark Farron while I've been away. Is it true?'

'So far as it goes.'

He said it through his teeth. 'And how far is that?'

'He took me to Sabratha, and to Beni Walid yesterday.' She was surprised at her own calmness. 'He thought I needed the change.'

'Did he?' It was deadly soft. 'Change from what? Me?'

'Just! a change. That's all there was to it. I'd have told you about it myself if you'd got back in time to give me the chance.'

'I'm sure you would.' He still didn't move from the door. 'Has he been here too? And don't bother lying, because I can easily find out from Mukhtal.'

She wondered briefly how the Arab's sworn silence would stand up to his employer's brand of questioning and knew she wouldn't want to put it to the test. 'I wasn't going to lie about it,' she said. 'Yes, he's been here. I phoned him that first night you were away.'

'*You phoned him!*'

'That's right.' She had not known how or when she would bring her own accusations to bear, but the moment was here right now without looking for it. 'Call it my suspicious little mind, if you like, but I wanted to be sure where Andrea had gone.'

There was no reaction in the lean features. 'And was he able to tell you?'

'No, but it hardly matters. You see, I know where she was. She was right there in your room with you when I rang your hotel.'

This time she did get a reaction, a tensing of a jawline already taut. 'So that was you. Strange, it never occurred to me to think it might be.'

Lisa stared at him, feeling the trembling starting deep down inside her. 'You can't even be bothered to deny it, can you?'

'How can I deny it?' he said. 'She was there.'

'As arranged!'

'No, it wasn't arranged.'

'Liar!' She flung the word at him. 'Do you really expect me to believe that?'

He took his time over answering, the hardness in his eyes matched only by that about his mouth. 'I don't suppose I do,' he said at last. 'And I'm not going to waste time in trying. You believe what you want to believe.' He paused, eyeing her narrowly, the anger in him held in check with a kind of deliberation. 'So you encouraged Farron to get back at me? How was I supposed to react?'

'I don't know.' Her head was rigid. 'And I don't much care.'

'You're going to care.'

He came over before she could move, swinging her up off the floor and turning for the stairs. Lisa struggled to free herself, heart hammering against her ribs. 'Put me down!'

'I'll put you down all right,' he came back grimly. 'It's more than time.'

She made one last effort to break his hold on her as he kicked open their bedroom door, but it was a wasted one. Her breath came out in a forced little sob as he dropped her on to the nearest of the two beds, her hands clutching frantically at the stronger ones reaching for the fastening at the neckline of her dress.

'No! Bryn, don't!'

'All right,' he said, 'you do it.'

Numbly she watched him move away to unbutton his shirt and slide it off, heard the soft thud of his shoes. She couldn't think of a thing to say that might do any good. His intention was more than obvious.

When he looked back at her it was without the least hint of softening. 'You've got about two minutes to get those things off, or I'm going to do it for you. It's your choice.'

'You can't be serious.' Her voice was low and more than a little shaky. 'Not like this, Bryn.'

'It seems to be the only way where you're concerned. . Once this part of our marriage has been sorted out we can maybe start talking rationally about the rest of it.'

'I don't want you. Can't you understand that?' She had come up on one elbow, mouth vulnerable. 'I don't *want* you, Bryn!'

'You will. I'll make sure of it.'

'If you force me ...'

'I'm not going to force you. There won't be any need.'

'You're so sure of yourself, aren't you?' she burst out with bitterness. 'Bryn Venner, the great lover! Why don't you go back to Andrea? She must be missing you!'

He came back to the bed without particular haste and pushed her into the pillows, coming down after her so that the whole length of her body was pinned beneath his. She fought him wildly until he finally captured her mouth, then went limp in his grasp, willing herself to stay totally unresponsive and knowing even as she did so that it was going to be useless.

Daylight woke her, this time with no merciful fog of blankness surrounding the memories. Bryn was still asleep, lying on his stomach with an arm across her waist, the dark hair rough and rumpled on a level with her eyes when she slowly turned her head.

His mouth, even in repose, had no slackness about it, the lips firmly curved above the ruthless jut of his jaw, his breathing deep and even. Some time during the night he had thrown off the covering sheet. Lisa followed the smooth, muscular line of his back down to where the tan ended in a strip of white, aware of the contraction inside her. This was her husband and last night she had known it. He had kept his word; he hadn't forced her. It hadn't been necessary to do so. There had come a point when everything else had ceased to matter but the touch of his hands, the sound of his voice, the need that was almost a pain carrying her into sweet oblivion. Right now she could summon no depth of emotion. That would come later. She didn't want to think at all, just lie here in limbo.

Bryn stirred and opened his eyes, coming awake all of a piece as he looked at her. The smile that touched his lips held no mockery, only recollection. Without lifting his head, he brought his hand up from her waist to her breast, possession in his caress, and familiarity. Lisa

felt the life flowing into her again and made no effort to curb it. Resistance was futile when her body refused to co-operate this way.

'Still hate me?' he asked softly.

'No,' she said, and knew she spoke the truth on that. 'I don't feel anything at all about you.'

'No?' The inflection was quizzical, bringing faint colour to her face.

'I don't mean physically. That's something I can't help. You know too much about lovemaking to fail in that sense.'

He said on a dry note, 'But your mind's another matter?'

'My emotions are. You can make me respond to .you only up to a point.' She made herself look directly into the cynical grey eyes as he supported himself on an elbow above her. 'Is that the kind of relationship you want?' -

'It's a start.' The cynicism increased. 'Some might even consider the rest unnecessary anyway.'

'Including you?'

'I don't know yet. We'll have to see.' He dropped his head to put his lips to the hollow of her throat, breath warm on her skin. 'Right now it doesn't make much difference either way.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was several days before she heard from Mark again. He phoned her one morning, his voice tense over the wire.

'Lisa, I've been trying to reach you for days. All I got was Mukhtal saying you weren't available.'

'He's under orders to say that,' Lisa said with flat intonation. 'You only reached me now because he's out doing the shopping for Hawa.' She hesitated before asking the obvious question. 'Have you seen Bryn since he got back?'

'Only from a distance.' The pause was brief. 'Why?'

'Somebody told him about those trips of ours. He didn't like it.'

'I didn't expect him to like it, but he hasn't made any attempt to call me out over it.' He waited again, coming back with obvious puzzlement when she failed to speak. 'What exactly happened between you two, Lisa?'

'What did Andrea tell you?' she stalled.

'Nothing much. She only got back three days ago.'

'Oh?' Her mind felt blank. 'Where did she go after Tunis?'

'How should I know? Why should I even care?' He sounded rough. 'So far as I'm concerned she could have stayed away for good!'

'She's still your wife.'

'Dammit, I know she's still my wife!' He took a hold on himself to add pleadingly, 'Lisa, I've got to see you.'

'You can't,' she said. 'It's no use, Mark.'

'You mean you've decided to stay with Bryn in spite of everything? I suppose he swore it wasn't true?'

'Don't sneer at me,' she said wearily. 'He didn't swear anything. I'm staying with him because I don't have any choice.'

'There's always a choice. Like you said yourself, he can't make you stay if you don't want to. I told you what I was prepared to do if you go back to England.'

'I know,' she said, 'and I'm grateful. Only I don't go anywhere without a passport, and at the moment I don't know where mine is.'

'You mean Bryn took it?'

'I suppose he must have.' Lisa was surprised at her lack of feeling concerning the loss she had only that morning discovered. 'Nobody else would be likely to touch it.'

'Then he must consider you've something you might be tempted to run away from.' His tone acquired a new note. 'Lisa, has he hurt you in any way?'

'No.' She was lying because he had, but not in the way Mark meant. 'I must ring off now. Pam is coming over. 'Bye, Mark.'

She put down the receiver before he could make any protest, standing there for a moment considering. Her passport must be somewhere in the house. If she looked hard enough for it she would probably find it.

And then what? she asked herself. She could hardly leave Bryn without some source of finance, and Mark's offer was out of the question. Meeting her own eyes in the ornate gilt mirror over the table, she wondered a little cynically if she were deliberately looking

for excuses. Some might say there were compensations to this marriage of hers: times when she could forget the bad bits. Only that wasn't enough because she wouldn't let it be enough. She wanted a real marriage, with a man she could trust.

Bryn had not mentioned the accusation she had flung in his face again, and pride alone kept her from asking him for some explanation. Not that she believed for a moment that there could be one. He had been with Andrea and there was no getting away from it. The knowledge seared deeper each time she let it into the forefront of her mind.

Mukhtal brought the mail with him when he returned. There was one long airmail envelope which could only be from her mother. Lisa slit it with singular lack of anticipation, steeling herself to run her eyes over the lines. It ran to two pages of extravagantly scrawled script, proffering apologies for being so tawdry and extending the excuse that she and her husband Larry had been on vacation when Lisa's cable had arrived. She sent her loving congratulations and suggested that Lisa might like to bring her new husband over to see them some day. Lisa took both the love and the suggestion with a pinch of salt. Her mother's shallowness as a person had stopped hurting a long time ago. It was just the way she was and nothing could alter her. At least she had taken the time and trouble to write at all. One must be thankful for small mercies.

Pam took her to the Jaddat Istiquat where the larger, more fashionable shops were situated that morning. Lisa had little interest in acquiring new clothes, yet her feminine instincts could not fail to be stirred by the gracefully flowing lines and tiny pleats of the silk *djerba* Pam picked out for her.

'The colours are fantastic with your hair,' she said when Lisa finally consented to try the dress on. 'Could look like a tent, of course, on

anybody with a larger frame, but on you it's perfect! You are going to take it?'

'I don't need a new dress,' Lisa muttered stubbornly. 'When and where would I wear it?'

'First opportunity,' was the prompt reply. 'Get Bryn to take you out to a night club or something. It's too good to waste on our crowd.'

Lisa gave in because it was the easiest way out, paying for the garment out of what money of her own she still had left. With household expenses taken care of by the Company there was little need of a regular allowance, she imagined Bryn thought. What she needed he obviously took for granted she would ask for; at least he had made no attempt to suggest any other arrangement. But it would be a long time before she asked him for money, married or not. She would, she reflected grimly, have to be desperate first!

They had lunch in a Greek-run restaurant near the Cathedral. Replete on moussaka washed down with copious draughts of fresh lime juice, they set out for home again around three through comparatively empty streets.

'Crazy English!' Pam commented, passing a streetside cafe full to overflowing of siesta-takers doing nothing more strenuous than lounging in chairs with food and drink in front of them. 'Everybody stops until four. Dan says he could take to the idea like a duck to water, but it's the only real chance he gets to catch up on paper work.' She paused, casting a sideways glance when Lisa failed to respond in any way. 'Tell me to shut up, if you like, but it's pretty obvious that things still aren't straight between you and Bryn. Want to talk about it?'

Lisa shook her head. 'I don't think so, thanks.' She summoned a smile. 'Don't worry about it, Pam. It will work out.'

'Are you desperately unhappy?'

'No.' That was perfectly true; she wasn't desperately anything. She pointed out of the window. 'Oh, look at that tiny donkey! It can't be more than a few months old.'

Pam took the hint and remained uncurious after that— on the surface at least.

'See you tomorrow,' she said on dropping Lisa. 'We're playing tennis at the Beach Club, remember?' Lisa hadn't, but nodded anyway. She liked tennis, and played a fair game. A little strenuous exercise might be good for her state of mind.

Bryn returned before dark for once, announcing without • preamble that they were going out to dinner.

'Majid Shalhi invited us to his home,' he said when she enquired where. 'Wear something long and fairly covered up. Majid might be Westernised on the surface, but he's out-and-out Libyan when it comes-to female modesty.'

'I wasn't arguing,' Lisa returned mildly. 'As a matter of fact, I bought a dress today that should just fit the bill.'

Bryn nodded approval when she showed it to him in the bedroom. 'Good choice. What did it cost?'

'I paid for it out of my own money,' she said stiffly, and saw his expression harden.

'I gathered that. I'm asking the price so I can give it to you, not to haul you over the coals for spending too much. If you'd told me you and Pam were going shopping today I'd have taken care of it last night.' He paused briefly, eyes reflective. 'I suppose I should make you some kind of - allowance.'

'Except that I could hoard it and perhaps use it to get away from here,' Lisa heard herself saying out of the blue. 'Is that why you took my passport?'

He studied her for a long moment with a look hard to read. 'You don't always give the impression you want to get away,' he said, at last on a sardonic note. 'You begged me to hold you till you went to sleep last night.'

Her face felt hot, but she kept control of herself. 'I imagine Andrea never displayed that kind of weakness,' she flashed back. 'Perhaps last night I was able to forget for a while just what kind of man you really are!'

'You've no idea what kind of man I really am,' he returned with a glitter in his eyes, 'but you're going the right way to find out.' He stopped and made an impatient gesture. 'I'm not going to argue with you, Lisa. Think what you like.'

'You didn't answer my question,' she said doggedly. 'Did you take my passport?'

'Yes.' His smile barely moved his lips. 'I'm keeping it for you in a safe place.'

'Until when?'

'Until you settle your mind to the fact that marriage needs working at. We're going to learn to live together, you and I, if it's the last thing we do.'

Lisa stared at him, torn between conflicting emotions as she viewed the set of the strong features. 'I thought we *were* living together,' she said, and his lips twisted.

'There's more to it than sharing a few intimacies. Remember, it's just as new to me as it is to you.'

'But nowhere near as abhorrent!'

'That's enough.' He sounded suddenly weary. 'You're being childish again. We won't be going for some time yet, but you may as well get changed while you're up here. I've a couple of phone calls to make first.'

Lisa didn't move. 'I'm not going.'

About to turn away to the door, Bryn swung back on her, brows drawing together. 'Want to bet on it?'

'You can find an excuse,' she countered, fighting the urge to back down. 'You could say I've got a headache or something.' Her voice quivered and was hastily controlled. 'I won't spend a whole evening pretending to be the devoted wife in order to impress this Arab friend of yours.'

'That's the last thing Majid would expect from a European wife.' He paused, eyeing her tensed body and defiant face, and a gleam came into his eyes. 'If it's going to be a clash of wills, let's see who's the stronger.'

She backed away instinctively as he came towards her, heart leaping. 'No, Bryn!'

'You always say that...' the grey eyes were mocking ... 'at first.'

Majid Shalhi had his home in an apartment block in the modern part of the city. Neither he nor his wife Faria were quite what Lisa had anticipated. Faria wore a dress not unlike Lisa's own in design and did

not follow the custom of donning a black veil to hide the lower part of her face in company as still did many of her countrywomen, although employing a modest demeanour towards Bryn. She was extremely attractive with her long black hair and dark eyes. Lisa judged her some five or six years younger than her husband.

Majid himself was every bit as devastating as Pam had made out, yet totally without consciousness of it so far as she could see. His English was excellent, his manner pleasantly deferential. As the man scheduled to take over the refinery when the Europeans started pulling out, he had standing in the world and need defer to no man. The fact that he did so with Bryn was a mark of respect and not ingratiation, Lisa gathered.

The meal was served by Faria, who had also prepared it. They did not employ servants, Majid felt moved to explain, except for the heavier duties. She had made *couscous* which Lisa, had only recently learned to like, never having been a fan of semolina. This one was particularly delicious and she said so, gaining a gratified smile from her hostess. Her English was almost as good as her husband's, but she spoke very little at first, gaining confidence however as the evening wore on.

Inevitably business matters cropped up between the two men, leaving their wives to find their own topic of conversation. Lisa discovered that Faria came from an extremely orthodox Muslim family who still followed the traditional customs of the country. Faria had been promised in marriage to the son of a close friend since childhood, but had rebelled against that future after falling in love with Majid, whose family were also acquainted with her own. Because Majid was a progressive he would have been unacceptable as a suitor even had she not been promised to another, so they had run away together, knowing that in doing so they were forfeiting everything. Majid had worked his own way up to his present position, and was still only in

his mid- thirties. Lisa gathered the impression that the years between had been hard, but Faria did not regret her action.

'I married die man I loved,' she finished simply. 'I could not have been happy with any other. You English are fortunate in your freedom to choose. Even now there is little real freedom among the women of my country. I am one of the few who do not wear the veil still in public places, but there are few places I would be welcome without Majid to accompany me.'

'That doesn't include the European section,' Lisa rejoined promptly. 'Would Majid allow you to visit with us?'

A smile touched the other's lips. 'It is doubtful. Your views are a little too advanced even for Majid's tastes. He would be afraid that I might become dissatisfied with my position.'

Which same reason would also preclude her coming here at any time alone, Lisa surmised- dryly. Perhaps if Majid only knew how little so-called freedom she had he would change his mind. She didn't even have the solace of love to ease the chains.

She was silent during the drive home, aware with every fibre of Bryn's lean, hard presence at her side. Strange to think one could have such intimate physical knowledge of a person yet still remain a stranger to what went on inside their mind. Faria knew no such limitations. In many ways she was to be envied.

'Feeling subdued?' he asked, breaking in on her thoughts. 'What was Faria telling you while Majid and I were talking?'

'About how she came to marry him,' Lisa said. 'She must have had a lot of courage to go against her family the way she did.'

'They both had a lot of courage. Majid lost all support from his own family too. As the eldest son, he would have taken over control of the

business when his father died. He could have been one of the most influential men in the city right now.'

'And he gave all that up for love.'

His glance flicked her way. 'Maybe not wholly. He could have wanted to prove himself in his own chosen field, not simply follow on in his father's footsteps. The men here can be just as hidebound by custom as the women.'

'Hardly. At least they've always had the freedom to come and go as they please. Even Faria is limited by Majid's availability.'

'Because she wants to be. Believe it or not, Libyan women actually enjoy going out with their husbands— and show it.'

'Did I let you down tonight?' she demanded, and felt rather than saw his smile.

'When—tonight?'

'Bastard!' she flung at him, and was surprised to hear him laugh.

'Not true. I had a mother. She died when I was a lad, but she was there right enough.'

Lisa bit her lip, already regretting the impulse. Words like- that did not come naturally to her; she had simply wanted to shock him. 'You know practically all there is to know about my background,' she said at last. 'I know nothing of yours.'

'Oh, I had every advantage.' His tone was easy. 'Good home, indulgent parents, expensive schooling.'

'You said you could barely remember your mother. Did she ...'

'She died when I was thirteen,' he cut in smoothly as she hesitated.

Her brows drew together a little. 'But surely you'd have a very good recollection of her at that age?'

'She travelled a lot with my father, and she was very involved with various organisations at home. Still, I saw her every day she was at home up until going away to boarding school. She used to come up to the nursery for half an hour.'

Lisa glanced at the straight-cut profile outlined against the suburban fights. His face was expressionless as his voice. She said softly, 'Did you look forward to that?'

'Not particularly. She used to like me to read to her. I was advanced for my age.'

At any other time Lisa might have felt moved to seize on that statement. Right now she could find nothing to say. Even her own mother had revealed more maternal interest than that.

'Don't read too much into it,' he advised dryly. 'It had no long-lasting effect—except to make me independent at an earlier age maybe. In some ways it was even an advantage because I'd no qualms about doing my own thing when the time came.'

'You've been self-sufficient all your life, haven't you?' she murmured. 'You've never really *needed* anyone.'

His shrug was light. 'Kids are resilient creatures. They adjust to circumstances.'

He hadn't answered her question, but she needed no answer. Certainly he had no need of her, except in the obvious sense. And even that was a case of propinquity creating its own desire.

They didn't speak again before reaching the house. Bryn was a long time following her upstairs. When he did come she was sitting at the dressing table brushing her hair. Through the mirror, she saw him shed his suit jacket and tie and slip the gold links from his cuffs to drop them into a drawer. Only then did he look her way, one hand busy with the buttons of his shirt. Meeting his eyes, Lisa felt her hand and arm go stiff. There was no way in which she could teach herself to act naturally when he was here with her like this in the bedroom.

'Don't look at me like that,' he said harshly. 'I'm no monster.'

'You will be,' she heard herself saying, 'if you come near me again tonight!'

His smile held little humour. 'You think it's unnatural for a man to want a woman more than once in a day?'

'Yes,' she said, not caring how naive she sounded. 'Yes, I do!'

'I could point out that it's after midnight.'

'It makes no difference.' She thrust aside the memory of his" arms about her earlier and tried to ignore the stirring of desire deep down inside her. 'If it's just a woman you want there are plenty of others available. I shouldn't have to tell *you* that!'

Lips taut, he said, 'You know, I could take it better if you weren't such a damned little hypocrite! You no more hate sharing a bed with me than I hate having you there.'

'The difference being that *you* know nobody else ever shared *mine*,' she flashed back at him. 'I wonder how you'd like it if it were the other way round?'

He gave a sudden audible sigh. 'It wouldn't matter what I said, would it? You'd still be convinced I was lying through my teeth.'

'You admitted Andrea was there in that hotel room with you.' It was all she could do to get the words out. 'You're not going to try telling me it was just a courtesy call.'

'I'm not going to try telling you anything,' she said grimly. 'I'm sick of the whole subject! Accepting that I've the moral scruples of an alley-cat, you won't be too surprised if I act like one, will you?'

He came over and yanked her to her feet, taking the brush from her to toss it on to the dressing table. 'Go on, fight me! I'm in the mood for a tussle.'

'I wouldn't give you the excuse.' His hands were hurting her and she wanted to cry, but he wasn't going to have the satisfaction of reducing her to tears. 'Just leave me alone!'

Sudden disgust sprang in the grey eyes. 'All right, I'll do just that. Right alone!' He let go of her abruptly and turned away. 'Tomorrow we'll have one of the other rooms made up and I'll move in there. That way you can stay unmolested every night!'

'Bryn, let me go back home to England,' Lisa pleaded. 'It would be the best thing—for us both.'

He didn't look round. 'The answer is no. We took it on, we stick it out.'

'In separate rooms?'

'That's your choice. You want me back in here you're going to have to tell me so.'

'That will be never!' she flared. 'I shan't miss you!'

The shrug smacked of indifference. 'Time will tell.'

There was a beach barbecue that Saturday by way of a change. Dan and a couple of the other men did the organising, transporting charcoal burners and supplies by car to the chosen spot as darkness fell, and setting up a cooking area under the stars. Everyone wore their oldest clothes with swimsuits beneath, the children creating a din which could be heard half a mile away according to some late arrivals.

Even at night the water felt warm. Those who elected to go in stayed within the glow from the fires and lanterns, except for one or two of the men who were strong enough swimmers to risk the silvered darkness beyond.

Lisa watched Bryn's head disappear, turning back to the sausages she was tending with a nagging sense of concern. It seemed dangerous to go out of one's depth in the sea at night, even with others in the vicinity. Not that Bryn would have listened to her had she been close enough to voice a protest. He decided his own actions.

It hadn't been easy this last few days. At least not for her. Much as she hated to admit it, she had missed the feel of his arms about her, the measure of forgetfulness he had been able to bring her. Her nights now were long and lonely, with sleep fitful when it came at all. There were moments when she had longed to go to him and accept what he could offer her, but she had fought the temptation. There would be no happiness for her without trust, so what was the point in starting again? She would just have to wait until Bryn himself realised the futility of staying together.

'Hi,' said Mark softly at her side, and she started. 'Give me a fork and I'll help turn the sausages.'

She did so silently, aware of Pam's eyes on them from some yards away. 'I didn't expect to see you tonight,' she said after a moment or two.

'Not my kind of thing, you mean?' His shrug was light. 'You're right, I only came because I wanted to see you. Where's Bryn?'

'Swimming.' She refused to let the thought of his coming out and seeing them bother her. She could scarcely ignore Mark altogether, especially at an affair like this. She added tentatively, 'Did Andrea come?'

'You must be joking!'

'But she's still in Tripoli?'

'So far.' There was an odd note to his voice. 'For how much longer is anybody's guess. She's talking about a divorce.'

Lisa barely knew what to reply. 'Will it make any difference to your job here?' was all she could find to say.

'Hardly. The Company won't like it because it's unsettling for the rest, but they can hardly throw me out on my ear -because my wife decides she doesn't want to live with me any more.'

She looked at him then, seeing the finely drawn look about his features in the flickering light. 'You're not as indifferent as you like to think, are you?' she asked very quietly. 'You still feel something for her.'

'You're imagining things.' His tone was flat. 'If she wants to go she's at liberty. She served her purpose.'

She served more than one, Lisa thought with cynicism. Yet she was unable to deny the small leap of hope. If Andrea left the country she might be able to bring herself to forget the part she had played in Bryn's life. That still wouldn't make their marriage perfect by any means, but at least it would lessen the odds against it. Always

providing the move was not simply to a place where Bryn could go to her, another part of her mind suggested nastily.

'I must talk to you,' said Mark, breaking in on her thoughts. 'Not here, it's too public. Can you get away some time during the week?'

'Mark, I already told you it's impossible.' Lisa tried to keep her voice down and look as if they were chatting in- consequently, all too conscious that the two of them were beginning to draw attention from others around them. 'What's the use anyway?'

'We need one another,' he insisted stubbornly. 'Lisa ...'

'Are you cooking those sausages or cremating them?' Pam inserted herself between them, not even bothering to pretend the interruption was accidental. 'Turn them over quick, before they go completely black!'

Lisa did so fumblingly, fingers made clumsy by discomfiture. Only when she glanced up on completing the action did she see Bryn standing a few yards away rubbing himself down with a towel. He wasn't at the moment looking in her direction, but there was a compression about his mouth and jawline that told its own story. When she brought her attention back to the grill again, Mark had moved on.

Bryn didn't come near her while the food was being served. It was Pam who secured enough for two and went to join him, sinking to a seat on the sand at his side with some comment which brought a grin to his face. Only when everyone else was served did Lisa and the other 'cooks' find time to eat anything themselves, and then they had to make do with the left-overs such as they were.

'Some hogs have been back for more,' Dan commented disgruntledly, viewing his own meagre plate. 'We allowed at least one mutton chop per person, as well as all the other stuff!'

'Have mine,' Lisa offered. 'I'm not hungry anyway after all that smoke.'

Dan took her at her word without delay. 'I'm starving!

Next time somebody else can do the donkey work.'

Pam waved an arm for them to come and join her and Bryn. 'Rule number one,' she said as Lisa sat down on the sand, 'never hang round looking after others at the cost of your own fair do's! Didn't you get anything at all?'

'I gave it to Dan,' Lisa explained. 'I wasn't hungry.'

'And he wouldn't say no, of course,' with a disparaging glance at her husband unconcernedly tucking into a sausage. 'Why should you have twice as much as anybody else?'

'Because I've done twice the work,' he retorted equably. 'Who got the fires going? Who organised the food? Anyway, somebody else had my chop.'

'Probably me,' Bryn put in. 'I thought I was doing well with two.'

'One of the perks in being top man round here,' Pam came back imperturbably. 'We have to keep you sweet and buttered up for the next couple of years.'

His laugh sounded a little short. 'It's going to take more than a couple of mutton chops to do that.'

'Damn. So much wasted effort!' She pulled a face. 'Marriage hasn't mellowed you at all!'

It was apparent as soon as she had said it that she was aware of having said the wrong thing. Even in the firelight it was possible to see her

face colour. There was an uncomfortable silence—uncomfortable, that was, for two of them. Bryn showed no reaction whatsoever, and Dan was too busy eating to notice any change in atmosphere. Lisa gazed fixedly at the children playing along the shoreline, leaving Pam to effect her own rescue.

'Remember suggesting a trip to the Western mountains?' she said quickly to Dan. 'We ought to make it soon or it's going to be too hot to do it in comfort before the back end of the year.'

'Suppose you're right,' he agreed between mouthfuls. 'Make it next weekend if you like.' He dropped the cleaned chopbone on to his plate with a look of regret, forked up what was left and paused to add with an air of having just thought of it, 'Why don't you two come with us? If we leave Friday afternoon we could spend a night in Garian and see the troglodyte houses, then go right on over to Jadu. Four's better company than two on a trip like that.'

'Brilliant deduction!' snorted his wife derisively, but her eyes were on Lisa's averted face. 'You'd like to go, wouldn't you, Lisa? You'd find it a change.'

'We'll come,' Bryn said before she could answer. His tone challenged her to disagree with the statement. 'A change would do us all good.'

Lisa made herself look round then and smile at her friend. 'It sounds fascinating. What are troglodyte houses like?'

'Built underground—or at least, in pits.'

'And people actually lived in them?'

'Still do,' Dan put in. 'By all accounts, about half the total population lives underground.'

Lisa was interested despite herself. 'But why not build houses on top of the ground instead of under it?'

'Because it's cheaper and easier to dig out as many rooms as you're going to need,' Bryn advised. 'Plus the fact that they provide better protection from the weather. The village is quite high up. They get frost in winter, even snow on occasion. It sounds more primitive than it apparently is. They even have electricity connected.'

'And separate rooms for visitors?' Lisa wondered wryly. How would Bryn get round that one when the time came?

The beach party finally broke up around midnight, those with the smaller children having left a couple of hours before that. It was Lisa who suggested the Anders call in for a nightcap on the way home, and Dan who declined.

'I think I need to catch up on some sleep, if you don't mind,' he said, stifling a yawn. 'I'm playing golf in the morning bright and early. Fancy making up a four, Bryn?'

'I'm off my game,' came the uncompromising answer. 'See you later at the Explorer's, maybe.'

'And don't forget about next weekend,' called Pam as they parted company to go to their respective vehicles.

Lisa slid into her seat as Bryn held the door open for her, waiting in numb anticipation while he went round the front to get behind the wheel. After that one encounter she had seen nothing of Mark again, which fact seemed to underline his sole purpose for appearing at all. She hoped he would make no further attempt to contact her. She had troubles enough without adding to them via another man.

He waited until they were on the road and heading back towards Tripoli before voicing any comment.

'When did you arrange to see Farron tonight?' he demanded.

'I didn't,' Lisa denied. 'I didn't know he was coming until I saw him there.'

'Odd how he waited till he thought I was out of the way to approach you.' The sarcasm rasped. 'I'll take him apart if he doesn't leave you alone!'

'And me too, I suppose?' she snapped, borrowing his tone. 'At least we did our meeting right out in the open, not in some sleazy hotel bedroom!'

'So it *was* arranged.' He ignored the last as if not worth his attention. 'Why, Lisa? What were you hoping to prove?'

'I've no idea.' She was too weary to argue about it any further. Let him believe it if that was what he wanted to believe. Perhaps it eased his conscience to do so. 'Why should you care anyway?'

'You're my wife.' His tone bit. 'Only because you made the mistake of marrying me. You should have done what most other men in your position would have done, and left me to rue my own folly. Nobody could have blamed you, me least of all. After all, I ...'

'Cut it out!' he said savagely. 'I've had just about enough!' He drew in a heavy breath. 'All right, so I made a mistake. I should have found some other way of sorting out the whole sordid mess!'

'Is that how you see it?' Her voice shook.

'No,' he said, 'it's how *you* see it. You went to bed with a man you'd met only hours before, and that one fact makes it shameful to think about. What you can't alter is the fact that you wanted it to happen just as much as I did at the time.'

Lisa put her hands over her ears, shutting out the sound of his voice and making her own ring hollow. 'I don't want to hear!'

Bryn brought the car to a sudden stop in the roadside, reaching out to seize both hands and drag them down again. 'You're going to hear!' he clipped. 'You're not going to block it out any more!' He shook her wrists, jerking her head up and making her look at him. 'It wasn't some trembling little teenager I took to bed that night, it was a real live woman needing a man!'

'I'd had too much to drink,' she defended. 'I didn't...'

'Enough to make you relax, that's all. Alcohol can't change basic nature. I roused you that night, and I've done it enough times since to feel pretty confident of doing it again any time I put my mind to it.' There was irony in his tone. 'You don't trust me, but that doesn't stop you being sexually attracted, does it, Lisa? You've missed sharing a bed with me these last few nights and you can't deny it.'

'If I have,' she got out, 'I'd rather go on doing it!'

'You'll have the opportunity. I'm due back in Serdeles again Monday for more talks.'

Something went cold and dead inside her. She said tonelessly, 'You could have mentioned it before this.'

'I only knew yesterday, and there seemed no call to bother telling you before Monday morning.'

'How long will you be gone?'

'Probably overnight, that's all.' He had let go of her wrists but was still half turned in his seat towards her. His tone hardened again as he added, 'And if you're thinking of contacting Farron at all, I'm warning you, don't.'

Lisa made no answer. It hardly seemed worthwhile. Nothing she said reached him in any way that counted.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was a long week, and for Lisa a miserable one. Bryn stayed away the two days only, but made no attempt to change anything when he returned. She wanted him she was forced to acknowledge, in fact she ached to have his arms about her again, but she still could not bring herself to lay her pride on the line by asking him to return to the bedroom they had shared.

Mark did not try to contact her, to her relief. Regardless of her feelings at the time, she knew she had been wrong to encourage him in any way. Two blacks did not make a white. So far as she could discover, Andrea was still with him, although nobody seemed to have seen very much of her this last week or so. If she finally went it might be fetter for Mark too.

Pam talked about the coming weekend with an enthusiasm which overrode Lisa's lack of it. They were sharing Bryn's car because it was both larger and had air-conditioning, the latter factor essential where they were going. By the time Friday finally came round, Lisa was more than ready for a change of any kind. This weekend had to resolve things one way or another. She could take no more of the emotional no-man's-land in which she had been living.

They left Tripoli in the early afternoon and in fierce heat, cutting through the rich agricultural land to the south of the city on the road to Azizia. Once the trees lining the roadside were left behind, Lisa found the run dull and flat, the monotony of the sandy-red plain broken only once by a small camel-train moving in the direction from which they had just come.

In Azizia itself it was too hot to get out of the car, a feeling apparently shared by the residents, who sat in groups wherever there was shade drinking tea and waiting for it to become cooler.

'Supposed to be one of the hottest places on earth,' Bryn said as they drove on through. 'They recorded a temperature of 134°F one time in the early twenties, I believe.'

'I'd have thought it was topping that right now,' Pam commented feelingly, rewinding the window she had opened to test the validity of his refusal to stop. 'Heaven help anybody having to work in that: I hope it's going to get cooler where we're going.'

'Garian will be. A lot of the rich Tripoli families still spend the summers up in the mountains.'

'Mountains?' She leaned forward to peer through the windscreen between the two men in the front seats. 'It's as flat as a pancake out there!'

'You can't see them yet because of the heat haze, but they're there right enough. We should make Garian in time to have a look round before dark, all being well.'

'So settle down and stop bouncing around like a two- year-old,' put in her husband with cheerful familiarity. 'You're wearing everybody out before we've even started.'

Involuntarily, Lisa lifted her eyes to the driving mirror, to see Bryn's sardonic glance reflected there. Would there ever come a time, she wondered wryly, when they could share the kind of relationship which allowed room for easy banter, or were they doomed to spend their fives together at war? The prospect chilled her. There had to be an alternative even if it did mean sacrificing some of her own principles to find it. So far she had made little attempt to give Bryn reason to be glad he had married her. In many ways she had handed him back to Andrea on a platter. Perhaps if she climbed down now and admitted to needing - him they might stand a chance of salvaging something from the wreckage.

The faint outline of hills grew gradually out of the haze until they sharpened into weathered crags rising two thousand or more feet above sea-level. The ascent was sharp and winding, the view back through the rear, screen spectacular as the road fell away to a fine winding thread below. There was no appreciable drop in the air temperature when Bryn stopped the car to give the engine a rest at one point. To Lisa it seemed even hotter than it had on the plain.

'The humidity is falling,' Bryn commented, echoing her thoughts. 'I'm afraid we might be in for a *ghibli*.'

Lisa didn't need to ask what that was. She had heard a great deal about the scorching wind which periodically swept in from the south to make life in these parts even more uncomfortable than it normally was. She hoped Bryn was wrong, or that it would at least hold off until they got back to Tripoli. Tempers were apt to fray when the *ghibli* blew, by all accounts.

Garian proved to be a small, clean village with shops either side of its main street, and a square holding the mosque, the police station and a hotel. It was beautifully cool inside the latter, the rooms pleasant and supplied with water. They lingered only long enough to deposit overnight tiling^ then set off in search of the troglodyte dwellings they had come so far to see before darkness overtook them.

The idea of living in a forty-foot hole in the ground took some getting used to, but there was no shortage of examples. Each 'house' was centred around an open pit with the rooms running off it cut out of rock and earth, entrance being effected via a separate sloping shaft to one side. Most had electricity and piped water, with natural light coming in from the central pit. No fences guarded the edges of these, making a thorough knowledge of the locality advisable for any strolling around after dark.

The discovery of an apparently abandoned dwelling tempted both men to make a journey down the shaft to inspect it at closer quarters; an opportunity which both girls unregretfully declined.

'I prefer my head above ground and my feet on it,' Pam declared firmly when Dan attempted to persuade her. 'The only way you're going to get me in a hole is tucked away neatly in a wooden box!'

'I thought you were leaving your body to science?' he said blandly. 'Or did they turn you down again?' Grinning, he dodged the missile she aimed at him. 'There might never be another chance like this.'

'It's going to be too dark to see anything down there now anyway,' Bryn decided, putting paid to the whole argument. 'Apart from which, we'd probably come up smothered in fleas. Better get back to the car while we can still pick our way through this lot.'

Lisa stumbled over a rock as she turned to go, and was saved from falling only by the speed of Bryn's reactions as he shot out an arm to catch her. Despite her earlier resolve, she felt herself stiffen away from his touch, and knew he had felt it too when he abruptly let her go.

'Those sandals are going to break you an ankle if you're not careful,' he clipped. 'Didn't you bring any others?'

She shook her head. 'I didn't imagine we'd be doing much walking.'

'Some places cars won't go.'

'We can probably find something in Garian,' Pam interceded swiftly. 'There are sure to be some places open even on Fridays.'

'After we've eaten, I hope,' came the plaintive plea from her husband's direction. 'It's a long time since lunch.'

Shopping at nine-thirty in the evening was still a novel experience to anyone accustomed to set closing times. The leather shoes Bryn made Lisa purchase were handsome and glove-soft, yet managed to give her all the support her sandals had lacked. Knowing he was right, she still resented the high-handed attitude he had taken. How had she been supposed to guess what kind of footwear she was likely to need?

Soft, filmy stoles from Fezzan caught Pam's eye in another shop, along with a pair of slippers straight out of the Arabian Nights.

'Made in Ghadanies,' Dan commented dryly when she finished bargaining for the latter and was having them wrapped. 'And sold, incidentally, for less than half the price you just paid.'

'But we're not going to Ghadames,' she told him with sweet reason, 'so I still got them cheap.'

Dan made an expressive gesture in Bryn's direction. 'Female logic! Do *you* understand it?'

'I don't even try,' came the dry reply, and Lisa steeled herself for the glance she knew was coming her way. 'Where women are concerned, it's a totally different track.'

The muezzin was just beginning his last call to prayer of the day when they finally returned to the hotel, his robed figure outlined against the faint light spilling from within the minaret, arms lifted to the east as he pitched his high nasal cry.

'That's going to sound great at four in the morning,' Pam observed resignedly. 'Why don't we go sleep in the mosque itself?'

Lisa wished she at least could do just that. Anywhere but with Bryn, the mood he was in. The fact that she herself had contributed to his frame of mind was scarcely a comfort.

The room seemed smaller now than it had by daylight, the two beds set close enough to be one. Bryn sat down on the end of one of them to ease off his shoes, pulling his shirt free of his waistband and peeling it over his head with a grunt of relief.

'Times like this you realise why the Arabs wear loose clothing,' he said.

He glanced round when she failed to respond in any way, watched her-making a pretence of sorting through the few items she had brought with her for a brief moment more, then reached out a hard hand and pulled her down beside him, holding her there with a grip like a vice on her forearm.

'This damned business has gone on long enough,' he said grimly. 'Either we talk it out now, rationally, or I'm going to finish up beating the hell out of you!' He looked into her darkened green eyes and gave vent to a sudden sigh. 'All right, so I've asked for it in part. I should have made you listen the other night when you flung the thing at me.'

'To what?' Lisa asked unevenly. 'A full confession?'

'An explanation. There is one.'

'You mean you've had time to think one up.'

His grip tightened threateningly. 'Don't goad me—I'm trying to set things right. Are you prepared to listen or not?'

The anger drained out of her suddenly, leaving her defenceless. 'I'll listen,' she said on a subdued note.

There was a pause before he started speaking. When he did it was levelly. 'It's true Andrea was in my room when you phoned,' he said, 'but it wasn't at my invitation. She arrived while I was changing for dinner. I could hardly leave her standing around in the corridor, so I

let her in while I finished getting ready.' His eyes held hers. 'I was still through in the bathroom when the phone rang, so she answered it. Naturally, she wasn't to know it was you on the other end either.'

'Why did she go to Tunis at all?' Lisa asked in the same unemotional voice. 'She must have believed you wanted her there.'

'She hoped I'd change my mind when I saw her.' His lips twisted. 'I'm not making any excuses for things that happened before I came to England and met you—that's water under the bridge. What I am saying is there's been nothing between us since I brought you back here with me. Unfortunately, Andrea isn't the type to take a brush-off easily. If anybody does the walking out it has to be her. She wouldn't believe I meant it when I told her we were through. She took it I was playing cool for the present because I didn't want anybody telling you what was going on. It took me quite some time to convince her I wanted her out of that hotel room and out of my life. Where she went from there I've no idea. I didn't see her again in Tunis, and I haven't seen her since I got back.'

'She didn't come back until three days after you did,' Lisa said, her mind going over what he had told her in growing turmoil. She wanted to believe him, yet there was still an element of doubt. 'Bryn, I...'

'How do you know when she came back?' he demanded.

Faint colour rose under her skin. 'Mark told me.'

'Oh yes, Mark.' He studied her a moment, eyes narrowed and hard. 'I meant what I said before about him. I'll cripple him if he comes anywhere near you again! I'd have done it already if I didn't have a certain amount of guilt of my own to contend with.'

'Because *you* stole *his* wife?'

'I didn't steal her. She was anybody's.' He broke -off, ran a hand through his hair and shook his head in quick self- disgust. 'No, that's not really true. She ... Oh, what the hell! It happened, and that's it.'

'But not in Tunis.' Lisa's knuckles were white where they gripped together.

'No, not in Tunis.'

It was up to her now, she realised. She either trusted his word or she didn't. Either way, he was finished trying to persuade her; that was apparent from his expression. Something gave inside her, releasing a flood of pent-up emotion. She put out a hand to him gropingly. 'Bryn ...'

He didn't let her finish, pulling her to him and cutting off her voice with his kiss, holding her close with a strength she couldn't fight and didn't want to fight. The doubts were still there, and she knew it, yet it made little difference right now. She just "Wanted to be with him, to have him hold her like this, to forget everything else in the whole wide world outside of this moment.

The *ghibli* was in full spate by breakfast time, enervating the senses with its scorching breath. Humidity was down to ten per cent, leaving the air gaspingly dry and burning by comparison with the day before. Shops remained closed and windows shuttered along the main street. Apparently few could bring themselves to consider working in such heat.

'Thank heaven for modern luxuries!' Pam exclaimed for them all when they were in the car and protected from the oven outside by the full blast of cold air from up front. 'Imagine travelling in this without it!'

. 'Would you rather go straight back home?' Bryn asked before putting the vehicle in motion. 'This could last hours or days. There's no knowing.' His eyes found Lisa's in the mirror, the smile in them reminiscent. 'It's all the same to me.'

'At least let's make it as far as Jadu,' said Dan. 'Or even Yafran if you're dead set on getting back today. Otherwise it's been a wasted journey.'

'Not quite.' The smile had grown, bringing warmth to Lisa's face. 'Like we said, a change was what we needed.'

Pam wore a smile of her own as she glanced her companion's way. 'Shall we make the casting vote?'

'You can't have two casting votes out of four,' her husband corrected, and drew a snort of derision. 'Pedant!'

'We'll carry on,' Bryn said dryly. Lisa moved her position a little at the first bend of the road so that she no longer sat directly in line with his glance. She could feel no regrets about the night they had just spent together because it went beyond regretting, but she could feel guilt over the questions still lingering in her mind. She loved him, she thought blindly, but she couldn't bring herself to trust him. What kind of basis was that for a happy marriage?

The country between Garian and Yafran proved mostly agricultural, but every bend in the road brought a difference in scenery. Thickening vegetation signified the approach of the Wadi Rumia where clusters of camels and goats drank from the channeled water drained down from the hills, watched over by their heavily swathed herders with *barakams* flying the sandy wind. Still climbing, they skirted a deep valley with a smattering of houses visible among the clusters of palms but little sign of human habitation. Then at last there

was Yafran with dramatic views over the plateau from its eagle's-nest setting, and pannier-loaded donkeys plodding the streets.

They had lunch at a hotel built on the site of an old Turkish castle, and afterwards paid a quick visit to the market place to see *barakans* and *burnous* being woven by old-time craftsmen. The sand crept everywhere despite all precautions. Whole piles of it had to be emptied from shoes and pockets before getting back into the car.

Jadu appeared at first sight to consist almost entirely of mosques with a castle as its centrepiece, the whole town built across three hills high above the valley beyond. From there the road began descending in a series of steep bends back to the plain, having crossed the full breadth of the Western Mountains.

'We can't make Tripoli tonight in this,' Bryn said as the desert closed about them like a shimmering, shifting sea in the fierce heat. 'There's an oasis not too far ahead where we can spend the night, according to the map. Then tomorrow it's a straight run back to the coast. Okay?'

Only Lisa failed to signify assent. Not that it made any real difference where they spent the night, when it all boiled down. After last night, Bryn could hardly be blamed for believing all problems resolved. It was only in her own mind that they still loomed large and unsurmountable.

The wind dropped towards nightfall, lending hope that the *ghibli* might be over, although a lull such as this was by no means uncommon. Lisa noted little about their stopping place other than to gratefully register the coolness and cleanliness of the palm-smothered hotel. With the heat subsided and the darkness full of the scent of lemons, it was pleasant to sit out on the patio behind the building after they had eaten. There was a small coach party of Europeans in from Tripoli on their way to the mountains they had just left. Two of the party were English, and close enough to pension age to make their

presence out here in the desert something to admire, although there was nothing whatsoever in their appearance to suggest they might either of them be finding the trip more than they could comfortably cope with.

It was Bryn who asked them over for a drink with their own group, smilingly apologising for his inability to supply anything stronger than fruit juice.

'Don't you worry none about that,' winked the cheerful balding little man who came from the north. 'We've brought our own along. Couldn't get to sleep without a nightcap, eh, Mabel?'

His grey-haired, comfortably padded spouse gave him a fond beam over the tops of her spectacles and agreed that a nip never hurt anyone. 'Are you all on holiday over here too?' she asked, getting on with her knitting at a rate which made the flashing needles sound like a pair of castanets. 'It's a grand place for getting about. Went to see the belly dancers last night, didn't we, Fred?' Her admiration was unfeigned. 'Beats me how they do it, it really does!'

'Do you do a lot of travelling?' asked Lisa.

'As much as we can. We've got the time now since Fred sold out the business.'

'I was in small tools,' he confirmed. 'Self-made and proud of it! We're going down the Nile when we've done Libya. Might as well see as much as possible while we're close on.'

'Close on!' repeated Pam laughingly when they had taken their leave a little later. 'How far is it from here to Cairo?'

'A thousand miles or so,' said Dan. 'Just a step for a pair like that. I hope we have half their spirit of adventure left when we're their age. Wonder where we'll all be by then?'

'I hope, contemplating a comfortable retirement,' said Bryn, pushing back his chair. His hand felt heavy on Lisa's shoulder. 'Ready?'

She wasn't, but she could hardly say so. She got up with the smile still etched on her face. 'Night, you two!'

Their room was cool and dim, the floor patterned with the design of the window screens, black against white.

'Don't put on the lights,' Lisa said quickly, 'then we can open the screens and let some air in.'

There was air enough already in the room, but Bryn complied without comment, pushing a hand through his hair and stifling a yawn as he turned back again from the window. 'God, I'm tired!' A smile touched his lips as he caught her eye. 'Could be all that talk about old age got to me.'

Lisa registered the stab of disappointment and wondered wryly just how contrary she could get. 'I'm tired too,' she said. 'It's the *ghibli*. It saps every bit of energy.'

'That's right.' He stood there for a moment looking at her in the moonlight, following the soft curving lines of her body in the simple cotton dress. Slowly the smile widened. 'On the other hand ...'

They reached the coast at Zawia just before noon, with the wind blowing hot and strong again from the south. The beaches were deserted, the roads all but empty of travellers. They had not been expected back before the evening, but Hawa soon rustled up a substantial cold lunch. Nobody felt like hot food anyway.

'I hope this blows itself out by morning,' Dan said with feeling over coffee. 'It's going to be hell trying to work if it doesn't.'

'Take a hint from the locals and don't,' Pam advised airily. 'It won't put the programme so far back you can't catch up again pretty easily.'

'My home leave is due next month,' he reminded her. 'I need to be on top of the job before we go.'

Lisa felt a swift constriction. With Pam gone she would be on her own, relatively speaking. The others were all friendly enough, but it was hardly the same.

'How long will you be on leave?' she asked.

'Four weeks. We're staying with my parents in the Midlands for two of them and visiting various friends over the rest. Should be reasonable weather in July.'

Bryn ran them home after dinner, returning to report little change in conditions out. Despite the air-conditioning, Lisa felt sweltered. The dryness in the air was the worst part. The thermometer on the patio registered ninety-six.

The pool afforded some relief, although the water was both too warm and too gritty with sand to provide any real enjoyment. Bryn was sympathetic but obviously possessed a higher tolerance level to climatic extremes himself as the heat didn't appear to worry him unduly.

She was still in the pool when Mukhtal came out to say he was wanted on the phone. He was gone only a short time, and wore a tauter expression when he returned.

'There's been an accident,' he said. 'Some of our people have been taken to hospital. I'm going in to find out more about it.'

Lisa came out of the water and reached for her robe, slinging it about her dripping shoulders. 'Who?' she asked in concern.

'I'm not sure yet. All I got were the bare details. Apparently the car they were travelling in ran off the road and went through a supermarket window in Giorgimpopoli. So far the occupants haven't been identified.'

'Oh, Bryn, how awful!' The heat was forgotten in the face of this greater distress. 'Let me come with you.'

'I'd rather you didn't,' he said. 'I doubt if it's going to be pretty.' He sounded grim. 'I'll get back as soon as I can, but don't wait up for me.'

'I'll hardly be able to sleep,' she protested. 'Will you phone me as soon as you know how they are?'

'If I can.'

She phoned the Anders as soon as he had left, but could tell them no more than Bryn had told her. Dan decided to follow him in to the hospital.

'Hope to God it turns out to be not as bad as it sounds,' he said.

Time dragged by on leaden wings after that, with no communication from anyone. Lisa was on the verge of trying to phone the hospital herself when she finally heard the car. The moment she saw Bryn's face she knew the news was going to be bad. He looked haggard and drawn about the eyes.

'I need a drink,' he said.

She poured him one swiftly, watched him toss it back in one gulp and forced herself to wait until he was ready to talk. When he did it was with control.

'It's going to be a shock. You'd better sit down.'

Her face had lost colour, but she made no move towards a chair. 'Who?' she whispered.

'The Farrons.' His pause was brief but telling. 'Mark was killed outright. He went through the windscreen. They needed identification.'

Lisa still didn't move; she couldn't. Her feet felt glued. Mark. She remembered him as he had looked on the beach one short week ago, tall and slim and so rakishly attractive with the brown hair falling across his forehead the way it always did, remembered the night he had sat here with her in this very room and offered her the only comfort he knew. Mark Farron whom she had known so briefly, used a little and liked such a lot—and now he was dead. No older than Bryn, yet his life was over.

She could feel Bryn's eyes on her now, but couldn't think of a thing to say. Something else was trying to breakthrough the peculiar numbness enclosing her mind—something she had to ask. When it came to her she said it without a quiver.

'And Andrea?'

'Concussion, a couple of cracked ribs, a lot of internal bruising, but she's going to be all right.' His tone was as emotionless as her own. 'Apparently she was driving.'

'How did it happen?'

'A tyre blew out. Nobody's fault, only try persuading somebody it just happened to to see it that way.'

'She's blaming herself?'

'Yes.' He looked down at the empty glass in his hand, a muscle jerking alongside his mouth. 'Seems they were in the middle of a

blazing row when it happened and she feels that slowed down her reaction speed. She even believes that subconsciously she might have wanted to harm him because of what he'd just told her.'

A kind of icy premonition crept into Lisa's mind. 'She obviously told you what it was he said.'

'That's right.' The face he raised to her looked void of expression. 'He said you and he were planning to go back to England together as soon as he could arrange things.'

CHAPTER NINE

AN age seemed to pass before Lisa found her voice again. She felt helpless.

'It's not true,' she said at last.

Bryn's expression didn't alter. 'So Mark was lying. You never discussed anything like that with him at any time?' He registered her faint hesitation and visibly hardened. 'The man's dead, Lisa. Don't damn his soul altogether.'

'It wasn't like that,' she pleaded raggedly. 'Bryn, please..

'Then how was it? No man offers to throw up a good job on a whim. He must have had good reason to believe it was worth it—and I know just how good a reason you're capable of providing, remember.'

Her face had whitened again, this time with a different kind of pain. 'Do you really think I could have been like that with you if I'd been planning to go off with another man?'

'Why not? I'm not doubting my own ability to rouse you. That's elementary. You didn't believe a word I told you the other night, but it still didn't stop you responding to me, did it?' He shook his head, mouth taut. 'I saw the way you were attracted to him that first time you met him. Everybody saw it. The two of you never left one another's sides. I told myself you'd get over it if you didn't see too much of him, but you obviously made your own plans.'

'The way you made yours with Andrea?' she flashed, wanting to hurt him as he was hurting her. 'At least *she's* still alive.' Her voice broke and the tears ran suddenly down her face as the numbness of shock wore off. 'You don't care that Mark got killed, do you? All you care about is whether or not I slept with him while he was alive!'

'That isn't what I said.'

'Isn't it? Good reason, you said. I must have given him good reason! Well, perhaps I did. At least *he* wasn't acting from any sense of obligation!'

'No, he went overboard all right.' Bryn hadn't moved, but the skin around his mouth was white. 'I'm only sorry I had to be in the way.' He reached out a hand then and put down the glass. 'You need a sedative. It won't make things better, but it will help calm you down.'

Lisa had stopped crying when he came back with the tablets and water, but her cheeks were still wet. She knew when she saw his face that no explanation was going to reach him. He believed her tears had been only for Mark.

He watched her swallow the tablets, then took the glass from her to place it beside the empty one he had deposited a moment or two ago. 'You're going to bed,' he said. 'We can talk about this some other time.'

'Bryn, it wasn't the way you ...' she began, but he stopped her.

'I said another time. You've had enough for tonight—and so have I.' He looked at her for a moment assessingly. 'Are you going to be all right?'

No, she wanted to say, but the word wouldn't come. All she could do was nod dumbly. There had to be some way of convincing him she hadn't meant what she had seemed to imply, only she wasn't going to find it tonight.

She stumbled going up the stairs. Without a word Bryn lifted her up and carried her the rest of the way, taking her into the bedroom they had once shared and sitting her down on the edge of the mattress.

'Try and get some sleep,' he said.

'Bryn.' Her voice came out a whisper. 'Don't leave me.'

His jaw contracted sharply. 'Do you know what you're asking?'

'Only for you to hold me.' She looked up at him beseechingly. 'Please!'

It took him some time to reply. When he did his voice was unexpectedly gentle. 'I'm sorry, but that's a bit beyond me right now. We've both got to do some coming to terms. The sedative should start working soon. If it doesn't you can have another. All right?'

There was little she could do but nod. Her throat ached. Mark was dead and so was their marriage—if it had ever really been alive. No amount of talking could put things right now. They had gone too far.

The *ghibli* was finished and Bryn gone from the house when she got down at eight-thirty. She refused all but orange juice for breakfast, and wished she had gone out herself when Pam arrived around ten, obviously full of the accident.

'It's dreadful,' she said over coffee. 'Hard to imagine you won't be seeing somebody ever again. It makes me feel guilty over things I've said and thought about him in the past. You were the only one who ever really seemed to understand him, Lisa.'

'Too well, it seems.' Lisa hadn't meant to say that, but it was too late now to retract. She caught Pam's eye and gave a small negative movement of her shoulders. 'You're right, it was a shock. I think I'm still feeling it.'

'There's something else, isn't there?' Pam was not to be that easily put off. 'Tell me to mind my own business if you like, but I've been thinking since I got here how absolutely washed out you look.'

'I know.' Her smile was faint. 'Bryn gave me a sedative last night, but it didn't seem to work very well. I barely slept.'

'Because of Mark?'

'Basically.' She hesitated, torn between the need to talk to someone and reluctance to let anyone else know what she was going through. The former won because it was the greater. She could trust Pam despite her flippant manner. Trust her, and perhaps gain some understanding. 'Bryn believes I was in love with Mark,' she said. 'And that we were planning to go away together.'

It was a moment before Pam responded, her expression reflecting a certain puzzlement. 'But surely you've told him it isn't true.'

'Dead men don't lie—at least their wives don't.'

'Andrea told him that?'

'Not in so many words, perhaps. It's very likely, in fact, that Mark did say what he's supposed to have said just before they crashed.'

'What *did* he say?'

'He told her he was taking me back to England and throwing up his job out here.'

The hazel eyes looked stunned. 'Why should he say a thing like that?'

'Possibly in an attempt to pay her back in her own coin.' Lisa had a lump like an egg in her throat. 'Apparently they were having a blazing row. Things get said off the top.'

'But it was a lie, of course.'

'Not wholly. He did once make the offer, and I didn't say no.' She made a small despairing gesture. 'It's all such a mess, Pam, and I've brought it on myself. I used Mark to try and make Bryn jealous and now it's rebounded on me.'

The other girl said softly, 'You really didn't feel anything for him?'

'Not the way you mean. I liked him a lot, and I'm terribly sorry he had to go and die like that, but I wasn't in love with him and I didn't...' Lisa's voice trailed off. 'Oh, what does it matter!'

'You don't have to convince me.' Pam had reached out to cover her hand with her own. 'I believe you.'

'Bryn doesn't.'

'He will once he's had time to think about it. Like you just said, we all say things in the heat of the moment that we don't really mean.'

Lisa shook her head. 'It won't make any difference.'

'Of course it will. Lisa, he loves you. He wouldn't have married you if he didn't.'

There was nothing she could say to that. Not without giving away the whole truth. Bryn didn't love her; he had never loved her. He had made love to her because that was his right and his compensation, but it was only her body that stirred him, not his own emotions.

'I shouldn't have dragged you into it,' she said.

'That's what friends are for. It won't go any further, Lisa. Some things I don't even tell Dan.'

'Thanks.' The gratitude was mingled with regret. What had she hoped to gain anyway? No one else could help in a situation like this one.

Pam stayed until mid-afternoon, fending off those who phoned to see if Lisa had heard the news with various excuses as to why the latter could not take the call herself.

'I suppose we're all the same,' she commented wryly after putting down the receiver on Marjorie. 'Tragedy holds a kind of morbid fascination. I wonder how Andrea is feeling right now? They might not have been very close as a couple, but there must have been something still holding them together. I don't much like the woman, but I can feel sorry for her. Being left a widow at twenty-eight isn't much fun.'

No more than being divorced at twenty, Lisa thought. Not that she would be, of course, even if Bryn did agree it was the only reasonable solution. It would be a couple of years probably before she regained her freedom. So easy to tie the knot, so difficult to sever it again—for some. A few weeks or a few years, it made little difference to the end result.

She had developed a certain fatalism by the time Bryn came home. There was little use in trying to convince him of her innocence when there was no future in their marriage anyway. And she wasn't innocent, was she? Not totally. She had used Mark as a shoulder to weep on without a thought for his own feelings.

Bryn came out to the patio only after showering and changing his clothing, a glass already in his hand.

'Want anything?' he asked from the doorway as she sat slowly swishing her lower legs and feet in the pool.

She shook her head without turning it in his direction. 'No, thanks.'

'Fine,' he said, and vanished indoors again.

After a moment or two Lisa got up and followed him, oblivious to the water dripping from her limbs. He was sitting on one of the divans with a sheaf of papers spread across his knees and the glass close to hand. He didn't even look up when she appeared in the archway.

^ 'Aren't we going to talk?' she asked tonelessly. 'You said later. This is later.'

'There's time.' He still didn't lift his head. 'Go and put something on.'

Lisa gazed at the crisp dark hair without moving. She had spent the whole day building herself up for this moment and now here he was acting almost as if nothing at all had happened.

'I already have something on,' she said.

This time he did look up, eyes moving with deliberation over the slim, shapely length of her body inadequately covered by the yellow spotted bikini.

'I don't need any reminders. Go and get dressed, then we'll talk.'

She went because there was little else to do, aware of having her motives misread. Nothing, she thought painfully, had been further from her mind than playing on his male instincts that way. At least, she hoped that was true. Subconsciously there might just have been some such idea, she supposed. She certainly had no other way of appealing to him.

Dressed in a cotton skirt and thin shirt-blouse, she lingered to draw a comb through her hair, knowing she was putting off the moment of return in dread of what had to come. They could talk until dawn and it wouldn't change anything. In some ways it seemed pointless discussing it any further.

Bryn was sitting where she had left him when she eventually nerved herself to go down again. He put aside the papers he had been studying when she came into the room to look at her dispassionately.

'That's better,' he said. 'Less emotive. Still not want a drink?'

Lisa shook her head, wondering how they were going to start and where. Suddenly she knew she had to be the first to say it. Her voice came out low but reasonably level.

'How soon can I get a plane home?'

His lips thinned. 'You're not going anywhere. You can't sort yourself out by running away from things.'

'We can't sort anything out by staying together,' she came back desperately. 'What's the use of prolonging it?'

'Because I don't like the alternative.'

'It has to be better than this. Anything does!'

'Not roaming round London on your own.'

'I did it before.'

'You weren't married then.'

'I'm not married now,' she burst out bitterly. 'It's a travesty, and you know it. It should never have happened.'

'But it did happen and we can't get away from it.' His face was tightly drawn. 'We're going to try again, Lisa. Both of us. If it hasn't worked out by the time my contract comes up for renewal we'll think again. At least by then you'll be a bit older.'

'And wiser? I doubt if another two years of living this way is going to make me that.' She paused, looking for a weapon to use against him. 'Aren't you afraid there'd be another Mark?'

'No,' he said, 'I'd make sure there wasn't.'

'I suppose you'd make sure there was never another Andrea too!'

The tell-tale muscle jerked in his jawline. 'That's right.'

'And you'd send her away?'

'I can't send her anywhere. She's a free agent.' He drained the glass and stood up to go and pour himself another, the set of his shoulders uncompromising. 'And we've finished discussing either of the Farrons, is that clear?'

'You can't block something out by trying to pretend it didn't happen,' she said. 'You told me that yourself. Bryn, it won't work. It can't! Not now.'

'You may be right, but we're still going to try.' He had turned back to face her, a look in his eyes that was almost derision. 'There's one department we haven't failed in yet. If that's all we have to build on at least it's not going to prove a rocky foundation.'

'Isn't it?' Lisa could feel the pain building up behind her eyes, and she knew she had to finish this now once and for all before she broke down completely. 'Even though you'd know that every time you held me I was wishing it was Mark?'

Something seemed to go out of the lean features—a total draining of expression. For a long moment he continued to stand there, then slowly he lifted his shoulders.

'That doesn't seem to leave much to say. When do you want to go?'

She had fought for it, but now that she had it there was no sense of relief. She wanted to take it back, to tell him she'd accept those terms—*any* terms—provided they could stay together. Only it was too late for that. What she had said left no room for retraction.

'As soon as possible,' she got out, jaw stiff. 'Tomorrow if it can be arranged.'

'Why not?' He paused, his face still devoid of any kind of feeling. 'One condition. I've some friends down in the West Country. I'd like you to go and stay with them for a little while before you try finding your feet in town again. There'll be no questions asked, I can guarantee that. All I have to do is phone through tonight and arrange for Adam to come up and meet you at the airport.'

Lisa took a time in replying, trying to find some way of saying it that wouldn't sound too much like a blank refusal.

'I don't think that would be fair on your friends,' she managed at length. 'I'll be all right on my own. It isn't so long ago since I was doing just that.'

'I said it was a condition. Either you accept it or you don't go.'

She stared at him helplessly. 'I don't see the point. They'd be complete strangers. Why should they be involved in all this?'

'Because they're very close and very old friends and they'll be only too glad to be involved.'

'Does that mean they already know about me?'

'Naturally. I wrote to them soon after we got here and apologised for the lack of wedding invitations. So far as they're concerned, you're the girl I met, fell in love with and married in a hurry because I didn't want to come back here without you. They'll understand that

problems can arise from that kind of start, and appreciate that a breathing space might be what's needed.'

'But it isn't just a breathing space we need, is it?' Lisa's nails were cutting into the palms of her hands. 'Bryn, I want to be free again. That means a complete break—no halfway house.'

'Legally you'll still be my wife,' he reminded her hardily. 'Go along with what I'm asking and later we can apply for an official separation order. It's the only way I'm going to let you go back to England, Lisa.'

The silence was lengthy. Lisa looked into the unreadable grey eyes and wished suddenly and desperately that he would reach out and pull her to him, tell her she was staying whether she liked it or not. Except that nothing would have changed even if he did just that. He still wouldn't love her. And there was Andrea, of course. Uncharitable perhaps to think ill of a woman so recently widowed, but her telling Bryn what she had told him gave her little claim to sympathy. No doubt they would console each other.

'All right,' she said, 'I'll go along.' She had no intention, but if this was the only way to leave this place then she would be her head off. 'Contact these friends of yours while I go and pack.'

He came up to the bedroom some twenty minutes later, leaning his weight against the doorjamb to watch her fold her things into her two suitcases.

'It's all arranged,' he said. 'You're on the ten o'clock flight to London in the morning. Both Adam and Irene are going to be at the airport. They'll have you paged, so there's no change of missing them. Okay?'

'It has to be, doesn't it.' Her voice sounded dangerously close to breaking. 'If these people are anything like you I'm going to have my life well organised.'

'You'll like them, don't worry. Irene isn't unlike Pam, though a little more firmly planted. They won't try to run your life for you. They're looking forward to having you with them for a while, that's all.'

Her hands stopped moving and she gave a sudden small sigh. 'I'm sorry, Bryn.' The apology was not so much for what she, had said but because she knew she would not be meeting these people who were putting themselves out for her sake. It would be simple enough once she landed to mingle with the crowds and make her escape. It was better that way. She wanted no further contact with this part of her life until it was forced on her.

'So am I.' He straightened abruptly. 'I'll take you out to Idris in the morning.'

'I'd rather you didn't.'

'I know you would, but you don't have any choice about that either.' One hand came out to toss what it had been holding on to the bed. 'You'll need that.'

Lisa picked up the passport after he had closed the door, leafing slowly through the pages, looking at the date of entry on the Libyan stamp. Just a few short weeks. It seemed like a lifetime. The girl going out through that barrier tomorrow bore little resemblance to the one who had come in. She would get over it, she told herself firmly. Nothing lasted for ever. Years from now she would look back and know she had done the right thing in leaving. In the meantime she would just get on with doing it.

Driving out to the airport proved the worst part. Bryn didn't say a great deal, but the strain lay between them heavily. The funeral was today. Lisa could only be thankful she would not be here to attend. She wondered how Bryn would explain her absence, and came to the conclusion that he would simply say she had gone back to England

and leave it to others to make of it what they wanted. He didn't really care what anyone thought anyway.

The flight was on schedule. Bryn saw her luggage checked through, handed over her boarding pass and accompanied her to the barrier with the same set expression.

'I'll phone tonight and make sure you got there safely,' he said. 'You should be in Exeter by six.'

She couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes for fear of what he would read there. He was capable of turning her straight round and heading back to Tripoli if he guessed for one moment what she was planning. Instead she looked at his mouth, remembering the feel of it on hers, the tumult of emotion he could arouse in her at a touch. It was going to have to last her a long time, that memory.

She said thickly, 'Goodbye, Bryn. Don't think too badly of me.'

'I don't,' he said. 'You can't help being you any more than I can change what I am. I'll be over in a month's time to sort out the next step. You'll stay on with the Leasons till then?'

'Yes.' She added swiftly, 'That's the last call for my flight. I have to go.'

She didn't look back.

CHAPTER TEN

It took a fortnight for Lisa to feel herself safe from being found. With little money to her credit, she stayed only the first night in London, then travelled north to Birmingham and found a temporary home in a hostel while she looked for a job. Clerical or junior secretarial work was not hard to come by according to the agencies she visited, yet the thought of being cooped up in an office all day again after the freedom she had known in Tripoli was depressing. The weather didn't help either. She missed the constant heat and almost inevitably blue skies far more than she had thought possible after such a relatively short time abroad.

Eventually, she settled for a post in the claims department of a large insurance agency, telling herself she could always look around for something else once she was earning. The salary was just about adequate to run to a bed-sitter, one of which she found a great deal more easily than she would have done in London without travelling far out of the city centre. Her landlady was a big jolly woman with a strong 'Brummy' accent and an insatiable curiosity, but she seemed to accept Lisa's story of having just returned from a short-term job overseas without question, despite the evidence of the white patch on her third finger.

Lisa had felt few qualms over removing her wedding ring. She wanted to forget her marriage altogether until such time as she felt confident enough to contact Bryn through a solicitor. How long that would take she had no clear idea. To think about Bryn at all brought a heartache she could hardly bear.

She refused the first couple of times one of the men she worked with asked her out for an evening, though not too brusquely because he was nice and ordinary and she liked him well enough. Whether he sensed that the time was right for a third attempt she was not to know,

but he made it anyhow, and at a moment when she was feeling particularly down and in dire need of any distraction available.

His name was Gerry Cunningham and he was in charge of her section. He was twenty-seven, he told her over a pre-cinema snack, and had been in insurance since leaving school. With his pleasant, unremarkable features, his horn-rimmed glasses and stocky frame, he provided no aching reminders of anyone else she had known these last weeks. He was even a little dull, she admitted, but it was a comfortable kind of dullness. She went out with him again the following week without thinking much about it. He was a friend when she needed a friend, and apparently without romantic inclinations, as he made no attempt to even kiss her goodnight on either occasion. Not that she wanted him to. She wanted no man kissing her. At all while the memory of Bryn's kisses still refused to be eradicated.

The nights were the worst time. Alone in the darkened, impersonal room which was home, she fought back the longing to give in and contact him. What was the use? In all probability Andrea still remained in Tripoli, and as long as she was there the doubts remained too. There could be no trying again under those circumstances, even if Bryn agreed to let her.

June slipped wetly into July. Wakening to the third morning of rain, Lisa thought dismally that she must buy a new raincoat. Her old one had been on its last legs before she went out to Libya and she had got rid of it, an action she regretted right now. Whatever she bought would have to be fairly inexpensive. Her first month's salary was already frighteningly depleted after she had paid her rent and other essential bills.

She took advantage of her lunch break to visit a couple of the larger department stores in the vicinity of the office, searching through racks of lightweight coats all beyond her pocket. It was in the second

store that she finally found a proofed cotton in a nondescript beige which came just within her limit. She certainly looked no fashion-plate in it, she thought, grimacing at her reflection in the adjacent mirror, but it would have to do.

'Lisa?' The voice came from behind her, stiff with shock. 'Is it really you?'

She had frozen into immobility, hands still holding the collar of the coat up about her throat. The mirror showed the edge of a skirt and one of a pair of slender, shapely legs all too familiar. When she finally nerved herself to turn round, Pam was standing a yard or so away in the company of an older and slightly bewildered-looking woman, an expression of complete incredulity on her own face.

'Hallo,' was all Lisa could think of to say. The shock was just as great for her. When she had thought of Pam at all, it had been as someone far, far away. She added blankly, 'What are you doing in Birmingham?'

'I could ask you the same thing.' The other girl made an effort to recover her composure. 'Bryn's turning London upside down looking for you right now. It never occurred to any of us that you might have come north. Why here of all places?'

'Why not?' Lisa's face was pale beneath its tan. 'Did you say Bryn was here in England?'

'Yes, he came over with us last week. He wasn't satisfied that the people he hired to find you were doing their job well enough. Lisa, *why?*'

Lisa moved her glance to the older woman still standing silently by, and forced a smile. 'You must be Pam's mother. I didn't realise her family lived in Birmingham.'

'They don't,' Pam replied for her. 'We motored in twenty miles to do some shopping. I'm sorry, Mom, this must all sound double dutch to you. I'll explain later.' She looked back at Lisa, eyeing the raincoat with distaste. 'That isn't you for a start. Take it off and come and have lunch with us.'

'I can't. I have to be back at work in fifteen minutes.' Lisa lifted an unsteady hand and beckoned to a hovering assistant. 'I'll take this, please. Is it all right if I keep it on?'

'Oh yes,' said the girl cheerfully, accepting the notes Lisa took from her handbag. 'I'll just get you a receipt so they'll know you haven't stolen it.'

'Who'd want to steal that?' said Pam as she passed out of earshot.

'It's all I can afford.' Lisa glanced at her watch. 'I'm going to have to run to make it back to the office.'

'And I'll be running right behind you! Lisa, you're not going to vanish again. Not without seeing Bryn first and putting his mind at rest. He's moved heaven and earth since you left those friends of his standing at Heathrow.'

'I don't want to see him.' The plea was desperate. 'Promise me you won't tell him you've seen me!'

'I can't promise that, and you know it. I'd have to break it if I did. Bryn has a *right* to know where you are.'

'I think it might be a good idea,' put in her mother unexpectedly, 'if you do as my daughter suggested and have some lunch. You can always ring your office later and make some excuse for not going back this afternoon.' Her smile warmed Lisa's heart. 'I realise it's hardly my affair, but it can't do any harm for the two of you to talk about it together, can it?'

Lisa sighed and gave in. Between the two of them she didn't stand a chance. 'All right,' she said wearily.

'Then off you go,' came the brisk injunction. 'I'll see you at the car about three, Pam.'

She was gone before either of them could protest, her well dressed, straightly held back disappearing among the racks of garments and other shoppers.

'Good old Mom,' murmured Pam with affection. 'Always the diplomat. Do you want to eat here in the restaurant?'

Lisa lifted her shoulders miserably. 'I'm not hungry.'

'Well, I am. So we'll stay with this place. I don't suppose it's any worse than store restaurants usually are.'

They had to queue for a table. By the time they did sit down, Lisa knew they would already have missed her at the office. What excuse she was going to give for taking an afternoon off, she had no idea. Right now that was the least of her worries.

'Did you say Bryn had hired somebody to look for me?' she asked when they were alone after ordering.

'That's right. At least, he had those friends do it for him. I think he was ready to come straight on over himself, but something cropped up which made it vital for him to stay.'

'The job must come first,' Lisa drawled, and drew a sharp glance.

'That's not fair!'

'I know it isn't. I don't feel fair.' She took a sip from the tiny glass of orange juice and pushed it to one side. 'Pam, it's no use Bryn

following me here because I'm not going back to stay with these friends of his. You might tell him that when you contact him.'

'I'll tell him. I doubt if he's going to take the slightest notice.'

'All right then, I simply won't be here when he comes.'

'You'll have to move pretty fast. He can be along inside a couple of hours of my phoning him, and he will be!'

'You've no right to interfere!'

'Yes, I have.' A hand came across to lightly touch Lisa's clenched one. 'We've all missed you back there, but me particularly. There's nobody else I can laugh with the way we used to.'

'I'm sorry.' Lisa meant it. 'It's all been my fault.'

'I don't think that's right. I don't think Bryn was so clever at handling things either. You were totally new to that kind of life and ...'

'And much too young for him,' Lisa finished wryly.

'That wasn't what I was going to say. Don't jump the gun. The point I was trying to make was that he shouldn't have married you knowing you weren't the type who could take to being left alone at short notice.'

'Perhaps he didn't know.'

'Then he darn well should have done! He must have learned something from those letters you wrote him.'

'I never wrote him any letters.' The words were torn from her. 'That was someone else.' She lifted haunted green eyes. 'Pam, it wasn't the way you think. We barely knew one another. You see, I thought I was

in love with the man who was marrying the girl Bryn had been writing to and ...'

'You mean you both got caught on the rebound?' There was sudden enlightenment in Pam's expression. 'That explains a lot.'

'What does it explain?'

'The way you were with one another when you first came out—like total strangers.' Pam shook her head sympathetically. 'I don't suppose that is a very good way to start.'

But rather better than the way they actually had, Lisa thought. Aloud she said hollowly, 'Now can you see why I don't want him to find me again?'

'No.' The reply was uncompromising. 'I can see why you might have wanted some time away from him to sort things out, but taking off into the wide blue yonder like this isn't going to help. I don't know how Bryn feels because he never gives his feelings away very much, but I'm fairly sure you're in love with him now even if you weren't to begin with.'

Lisa didn't try to deny it. Where was the point? 'Is Andrea still in Tripoli?' she asked with deliberation.

Something flickered in the hazel eyes opposite. 'Yes, she is. The Company are allowing her to stay on in the villa until all the legal details are dealt with.'

'But she's quite better?'

'I wouldn't say wholly, no. Cracked ribs apparently take some time to heal properly.'

'I daresay she hasn't gone short of solicitous enquiry.'

'My, aren't we the little cynic all of a sudden!'

'Don't I have cause?'

'You mean, has Bryn been seen visiting the invalid? Not that I know of. Of course, I can't have ears everywhere. He might have been up to all sorts of underhand business since you left. Men are like that, aren't they? So...' She broke off with a sudden wry grimace. 'Sorry, but you do take this suspicion thing a bit too far. Most of us knew he was known ... having an affair with her before he came over here and met you, but there hasn't been the slightest hint of it since.'

'Are my suspicions any worse than the ones he has of me?' Lisa demanded, and drew a sigh.

'I suppose not, although you did rather ask for it. You're probably right about not knowing one another well enough to have any trust: I trust, Dan because I do know him, as well as love him.'

With some purpose, Pam turned the conversation into more normal channels while they ate, talking about her family, which included a married sister with two small children living in the same area. 'They're great kids,' she said. 'Little Karen makes me wish we'd gone in for a baby straight away. Dan dotes on them both.'

'What about needing to spend the first couple of years on your own?' asked Lisa, drawn despite herself.

Pam smiled and shrugged. 'I think we've both discovered you can't make a blueprint for living. Priorities change. I don't suppose Libya is the ideal place to start a family, but another two years might be too long to wait. If nothing else it would have the benefit of some sunshine. You know, we've scarcely seen the sun since we got back to England. I'd almost rather have a *ghibli* than this!'

Recalling the scorching discomfort of the one they had experienced, Lisa could scarcely agree with hers but she knew what she meant. At its best, there was nothing to beat an English summer. It just didn't happen very often, that was all.

'I've missed the sun,' she admitted. 'I'd got used to not having to think about what to wear each day. Is Mukhtal keeping the pool clean?'

'He was up to the last time I used it. He might let it slide now there's no one there permanently to keep an eye on him.' Pam paused. 'He asked me if the Saidi would be coming back. I told him probably. Why not make me a prophet?'

Lisa swallowed painfully. 'I can't go back. Apart from anything else, I couldn't face everyone.'

'Does it matter so much what others think? Most of them have probably suffered marital problems of one kind or another at some time themselves. Anyway, it's doubtful that anyone else knows why you left. Bryn just said you couldn't stand the heat when he was asked, so most finished up with the impression that you'd be back when the hotter months were over. It's happened before like that.'

'I won't be going back,' Lisa repeated. 'I couldn't go through all that again.' She looked across at the other girl in appeal. 'Do you really have to tell him where I am? Can't you just pretend you never saw me?'

'Look, if I say nothing my mother will be sure to mention it to Dan when we get back. I can hardly drag her into a conspiracy of silence.'

'No, I suppose not.'

Pam waited a moment before adding persuasively, 'Why not come on back with us and wait for Bryn to arrive? There's plenty of room. You wouldn't have to share.'

'I have a job to go to in the morning.'

'Want to bet on it? You know there's no way he's going to leave you here on your own.'

'He won't have any choice. This isn't Libya.'

'All right,' with a sigh, 'have it your own way. You'll just have to give me your address.' Pam caught the fleeting expression in Lisa's eyes and smiled grimly. 'On second thoughts, we'll drop you off. That way I can make sure it's where you really live.'

There was no arguing with her—and no losing her either. She stuck like glue as they threaded their way through the store and out into the street. The rain had stopped, though the sky was still heavily overcast.

'Must have seen that coat of yours,' Pam observed dryly. 'The car's in a multi-storey round the corner. Mom should be there by the time we are.'

She was, her glance a little surprised when she saw Lisa.

'We're taking her to the place where she's staying before we go on home,' Pam explained. 'It won't take us much out of our way.'

It was only a fifteen-minute drive out of the city centre to Lilly Road, though it took Lisa closer to half an hour by bus. Pam insisted on coming indoors with her for a moment, pulling a face at the sight of her room.

'Bryn will do his nut,' she said inelegantly. 'His wife living in one room!'

'I was in a similar one before he married me,' Lisa returned without particular resentment. 'It's only a matter of what you're used to.' She hesitated. 'When are you going to phone him?'

'As soon as I get home. He can be here by seven if he puts a spurt on, so you won't have much time for a flit, if that's what you're considering.'

Lisa had considered it, but the idea had been a fleeting one. Where did she go? No, she would stay and face him— get it over with. He could neither make her go back to Libya with him nor to these friends of his. She had a fob and a new life of sorts. If she chose to stay there was nothing he could do about it.

'I'll still be here,' she said.

Time dragged after Pam had gone. Lisa thought of phoning the office, except that to do so meant going down to the hall where the communal pay phone was kept and running the gauntlet of Mrs Banks' curiosity if she happened to overhear the conversation through her ever-open door. In any case, she still hadn't conjured up a suitable excuse for her absence. Better to leave it till morning, she decided eventually. And she would be going in the morning; she was determined on that.

The room was already tidy, but she went round it again anyway, smoothing the cover on the divan and plumping up the cushions, drawing the curtain over the compact kitchen area at one end, pushing the two chairs right up under the table set against one wall and rearranging the vase of flowers on top of it. The only really comfortable seat was a shabby armchair close by the gas fire. It was hardly cool enough to need the latter on, yet the glow, even on low heat, lent an extra touch of cosiness to the place.

The knock on the door just after seven-thirty took her by surprise because she had been listening for a car drawing up outside. She went to open it with fast beating heart, only to stare blankly at the stocky, bespectacled figure standing there.

'I came round to see how you are,' said Gerry. 'We assumed you must have been taken ill during lunch break.' His eyes went over her face uncertainly. 'Is that what happened?'

'Not quite. I ... was called away unexpectedly.' It sounded lame, but it was the best she could do at short notice. 'I didn't have time to phone the office and let you know. I'm sorry, Gerry.'

'Just so long as you're not ill.' He sounded frankly puzzled. 'You're not... in any trouble, are you?'

'No.' She gave a sudden resigned sigh and stood back. 'You'd better come in.'

He did so awkwardly, not by any means insensitive to her lack of welcome, casting a quick glance around.

'Nice little place.'

'Little being the operative word.' She tried to think of some way of telling him what she had to tell him without sounding too bald about it, but there was only one way. 'I'd offer you some coffee,' she said, 'but I'm expecting my husband along any moment.'

'Your what?' His jaw had literally dropped. He stared at her for several seconds before saying doubtfully, 'Are you kidding?'

'Believe me, it's no joke.' She lifted her shoulders ruefully. 'I should have told you. I asked Personnel to keep it quiet because I didn't want any awkward questions.'

'Didn't they ask any?'

'Not when I told them I was separated from him.'

He shook his head bemusedly. 'Lisa, you don't even look old enough to be married at all, much less that!'

'Well, I am, on both counts. And I'm staying that way, so I'll be in tomorrow morning as usual.'

A spark of enlightenment crept into his eyes. 'Bit of an irresponsible type, is that the trouble? I always said no man should think about getting married before he's carved himself some kind of position in life.'

Lisa wanted suddenly to laugh, and knew that if she did it would be with an edge of hysteria. Gerry would be offering to stay and help her face up to this no-good husband of hers soon.

'He's thirty-one,' she said, 'and an oil executive, and if he finds you here with me he's probably going to think the worst. I'll see you in the morning, Gerry, but please leave now.'

The second knock on the outer door came at the worst psychological moment. She felt her own face stiffen, and thought that Gerry wasn't looking too happy either. She had heard no car, but this could only be Bryn.

He looked very little different from when she had last seen him, except for the beige suede jacket which would have been far too warm in Libya. The grey eyes rested only a brief moment on her face before lifting beyond her to the man standing uncertainly in the middle of the room.

'Entertaining?' he asked.

Gerry moved as if on cue. 'I was just going,' he mumbled. 'I just came round to make sure Lisa ... I mean, with her not coming in to the office this afternoon ...'

'Gerry is chief clerk in the claims section of the insurance firm I work for,' Lisa said stonily as his voice tailed off. 'Pam may have mentioned that she kept me away from work this afternoon.'

'She said you'd had lunch together.' Bryn stood to one side to let the younger man pass, added brusquely, 'You might advise whoever's in charge of the hiring and firing that my wife won't be back. If there's any adjustment to make they can reach me through Unital head office in London.' He closed the door firmly on the appealing glance Gerry had turned back in Lisa's direction, and stood with his hand resting on the knob looking at her unsmilingly. 'You're certainly good at vanishing.'

'I meant to be.' She drew in an unsteady breath. 'You had no right to tell Gerry what you did. Luckily he's sense enough to wait and see whether I put in an appearance before doing anything about it. I'm not leaving my job, Bryn. I've made a new life for myself here, and I'm not giving it up.'

He took a look around the room, his lip visibly curling. 'Some life!'

'It's no worse than the one I was leading when I first met you,' she defended. 'I was hardly out of it long enough to gain any snob values!' She made herself pause there before she said too much, seeing the tightening of his jaw. 'I'm afraid I don't have any spirits in,' she added huskily, 'but I could make some coffee if you'd like something to drink. Did you come straight here?'

'Yes. Pam gave me the address over the phone. I left the car a couple of streets away and walked until I found the place. I was going round in circles.' He made a sudden impatient gesture and came away from the door. 'Okay, make some coffee if it's going to help any.'

She did so in silence, vitally aware of his waiting presence seated in the one chair. He made the room seem somehow even smaller than it

was, she thought, fumbling with the ill- balanced saucepan on the smaller of the two gas rings. The smell of burned milk did nothing for the atmosphere.

Bryn accepted the thick pottery mug from her without comment, drank a little of the contents, then put it down beside him on the floor.

'Now you've had time to gather yourself maybe we can get moving,' he said. 'How long will it take you to pack?'

She gazed at him with a mounting sense of impotence, judging the implacable set of his mouth. 'I told you I'm not going anywhere.'

'And I'm telling you you're not staying here.'

'There's no way you can force me to leave.'

'You mean legally?' He gave her an ironical glance. 'I don't give a damn about the legal aspect, and neither do you. The only way you can save face is by having me hoist you back without any choice.'

'You really think that's all there is to it—pride?'

'I think it has a lot to do with it. You've had this thing about me being forced into marrying you from the start. Well, I'm not being forced into anything now. You've proved you can look after yourself—after a fashion—so I don't have to feel obliged to do it for you.' He paused, his tone altering a shade. 'I want you back, Lisa. This break was never intended to be more than just that. We don't have to go back to Tripoli right away—unless something urgent crops up. We can take a few days out first.'

Longing swamped her for a moment, but she resolutely fought it off. 'It wouldn't change anything,' she got out. 'You'd still prefer an older woman.'

'For what?' He sounded impatient again. 'Have I ever given the impression you were failing me when I've made love to you?'

'Not ultimately, perhaps.' Her cheeks felt warm. 'But that's just ... well, it doesn't make much difference to a man, does it?'

He studied her with hard eyes. 'There's a very crude way of putting what you're trying to say. It makes one hell of a difference and don't you forget it! If I thought...' He bit down on whatever he was about to add, said instead, 'This isn't settling anything. I'll straighten you out on that score later. Just get your things together. Do you owe any rent on this place?'

Lisa shook her head. 'It's paid for the coming month.'

'That should compensate for lack of notice.' He hardened again when she made no move. 'We can always leave your things right here. I daresay your landlady might get a fair price from some local dealer.'

'Have you forgotten what I told you the night before I left Tripoli?' she asked desperately.

He shook his head. 'I haven't forgotten. You might have got to me with it that one time, but not any more. Mark's dead. I think we can safely lay his ghost to rest.'

'And Andrea's?'

'I thought we already had.'

'Not for me. Pam tells me she's still right there in Tripoli.'

'Pam is perfectly right. A Company decision, not a personal one.'

'But you haven't been to see her, of course.'

'Not since she came out of hospital. I've been kept rather busy, one way and another.'

'Which means you would have done if you'd had time.'

He sat still in the chair for a moment, looking across to the divan where she was sitting with a slow change of expression. Then he was getting up, sliding off his jacket as he did so and tossing it across the arm of the chair before moving towards her.

'I've tackled this all wrong,' he said. 'There's only one way I'm going to get through that stubborn streak of yours.'

'No,' Lisa whispered, and knew she didn't mean it. From the moment she had seen him again she had been waiting for this to happen, longing for him to stop talking and take hold of her. She'd had to goad him into it in the end— which proved something, though right now she didn't much care what.

His mouth was possessive, allowing no turning away even if she had wanted to turn away. She came quiveringly alive under his touch, feeling the warmth run through her like quicksilver. This time when he undressed her, she no longer cared how practised he was at it. She just wanted to be close to him, to see the flare in his eyes when he looked at her, to know she could reach at least some part of him without reservation.

'Lisa ...' he muttered thickly against her skin ... 'oh, God, I've missed you! I didn't realise just how much.'

She ached to tell him then that she loved him, but the words wouldn't come. It was only this side of their relationship he had missed. Well, she had missed it too, so it was something they'd shared these last two weeks. She would have to settle for that for the present.

It was gone ten when they finally left the house. Bryn had brought the car round to the front from where he had left it parked, and settled matters with a frantically speculative Mrs Banks who was even now watching them through a chink in the curtains of her ground floor living room as they loaded her suitcases into the boot.

He had asked her earlier if she wanted to go to a hotel here in Birmingham for the night or drive straight back to London where he still had a room reserved. Lisa had opted for the drive because she needed time to think—although for what difference it was going to make now she might as well not bother thinking at all. Bryn wasn't going to accept any reasons she put forward for not going back to Tripoli with him. Not after the way she had gone to him tonight. Yet the spectre of Andrea Farron still haunted the back of her mind, try to dismiss her as she would. Bryn might be telling the truth when he said he hadn't been to see her since her release from hospital, but he had admitted to visiting her there, which seemed to suggest some retention of involvement. She would never be content until the other woman was beyond reach altogether, she acknowledged. It was a grim outlook.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEY made Bryn's London hotel just before twelve-thirty. At that time of the night the foyer was still awash with people. Standing to one side while Bryn secured his key and explained her presence, Lisa was conscious of the receptionist's swift glance and knew her face had coloured a little.

'I think he thought I was someone you'd picked up,' she said ruefully on the way up in the lift. 'Did you see the way he looked at me?'

'Pick-ups don't usually come complete with luggage,' he pointed out without much amusement. 'You're imagining things again. I told them when I arrived that my wife might be joining me later. That's why I booked a double room.'

'Oh.' As the doors slid open she stole a glance at him. 'Are you angry?'

'No,' he said. 'It's all part of that complex of yours. You see every situation in its worst light. Maybe you'll grow out of it one of these fine days.'

The room was large and luxurious with a fine view right across the park. Lisa waited until her cases had been brought up by the following porter before saying tentatively, 'I heard you tell them downstairs that we'd be leaving in the morning. Are you planning to go straight back to Tripoli after all?'

He shook his head. 'I promised Irene and Adam I'd take you down there when I caught up with you.'

'And leave me there as planned?'

'Hardly now. You'd only take off again.' He was smiling, but the smile did not reach his eyes. 'From now on we accept what we've got and stop trying to change one another. Agreed?'

'Agreed.' It wasn't going to be enough, and she knew it, but for now it had to do.

The Leasons lived in a lovely old red-brick house between Exeter and Tedburn St Mary. Adam ran a thriving antiques business in the city while Irene, as she herself put it, stayed home and looked after the menagerie, consisting of two dogs, three cats and a couple of thoroughbred mares roomed in a comfortable stable converted from a former garage out at the rear of the house. That they were childless was apparently a fault of nature rather than any decision on their part, as both seemingly found a delight in holding open house for half the neighbourhood children. Lisa had to admit that staying there would not have been too much of a trial even under the circumstances.

Irene refused to listen to her tentative apology for the trouble she had caused them.

'These things happen,' she said. 'I've known Bryn too long to be too surprised you found him difficult to live with. He had a rather deprived childhood.'

'Deprived?' Lisa queried, remembering what he had told her once, then she paused. 'Oh, you mean his mother?'

'I mean his whole family set-up, or lack of it. It seems his parents never really wanted children at all, but having slipped up they decided their son was going to be a credit to them. Bryn never talked all that much about it, but I gather he was hardly ever allowed to play the way children usually do. He had to work right from nursery age at being the cleverest child in the Venners' circle of acquaintances. Lucky he had a good brain or heaven knows what they'd have done to him!'

'He once mentioned he didn't see much of them.'

'No, I remember hearing my mother say what a shame it was for any child to lack affection the way he did. The trouble is it seemed to freeze any real capacity for giving it either. That's why I was so relieved at first to hear he'd got himself married at last.'

Lisa reached out and patted the fine chestnut head thrust over the stable door at her, not looking at the older woman. 'Until you realised I was hardly the ideal wife for him?' she said softly.

Irene smiled a little, pushing a lock of brown hair back from her thin, intelligent face. 'If you mean too young, I don't necessarily agree. Providing you love him enough it doesn't really matter. Do you love him, Lisa?'

'Yes.' A small frown creased the space between her eyes. 'But I'm not all that sure what constitutes enough.'

'Well, for a start, learning to put up with the way he is. He's gone his own way for so long now it's going to take time to persuade him to see other points of view. I imagine he can take the dominant male theme a bit too far when he's in that mood.'

Lisa had to smile. 'Sometimes.'

'Thought so. That's another sign of basic insecurity.' .

Lisa could hardly agree with her. Anyone less insecure than Bryn she had yet to meet.

As if sensing her rejection, Irene changed the subject. 'We'll have to arrange a get-together for a few friends,' she said as they turned back to the house. 'Bryn normally spends a part of his leaves with us when he's in the country. Last time was just before he met you, of course.'

Bare weeks ago, yet in that space his whole life had been turned upside down. And it wasn't only the loss of his bachelorhood he'd had

to fight, Lisa reflected wryly, recalling the time she had bitten him. If she had been responsive to him that night he might never have needed Andrea again at all.

It was over dinner that evening that Irene asked Bryn how much longer he was thinking of staying.

'Not that we're ready for you to go by any means,' she added hastily. 'I only want to know so I can arrange a bit of a party before you do.'

Bryn didn't even look in Lisa's direction. 'Another couple of days at the most,' he said. 'I'd like to get seats on Monday's afternoon flight if I can.'

'Then it had better be tomorrow,' Adam put in from the head of the table where he was lovingly carving a fine cut of beef. 'Give you a day to recover. You know how our parties tend to go.'

'I know how the last one went.' Bryn's smile was reminiscent. 'I had the worst hangover I've ever experienced, bar none!,'

Irene laughed. 'I don't think you were on your own. I was the only one who turned up for morning service out of half a dozen regulars. I remember the sermon was on the evils of over-indulgence. I still don't know whether it was sheer coincidence or good guesswork on the Vicar's part.'

'Probably shades of envy,' Adam observed dryly. 'That wife of his is enough to turn any man to drink, and he can't, can he. Is that enough for you, Lisa?'

She took the plate from him with a smile of agreement, wondering if she and Bryn would ever live a life as normal as this one. On the other hand, would she want it?

Later that night Bryn seemed to echo her thoughts when he said softly, 'You've really settled in here, haven't you, Lisa? Do you wish you were staying?'

She stirred in his arms, too drowsy to be less than honest. 'I want to be where you are, Bryn, even if I didn't like where you were. Does that answer your question?'

'Not quite,' he said, after a moment, 'but it goes a long way.'

The party turned out to be a larger affair than Lisa had anticipated, but the house was more than big enough to comfortably accommodate the thirty or so people who milled around it over the course of the evening. Most of them seemed already acquainted with Bryn, and eager, if a little taken aback, to meet Lisa herself. At Bryn's request she had worn the silk *djerba* and swept her hair up, which helped, but she was still an obvious several years younger than anyone else present.

It must have been about halfway through the evening that she first became aware of the blonde-haired woman in a white dress which reminded her of the one Andrea Farron had worn at that other party so far away from here. Apart from that, there was little resemblance, she supposed, although this one was attractive too. She was talking with a group of which Bryn was a part, but not paying him any particular attention. It was only as the other couple drifted away that Lisa saw her move closer to him and lift her glass with just the kind of smile Andrea would have used had she been here, saying something which could not be heard but which drew an answering smile to Bryn's lips.

The pangs started deep, uncurling like sharp little claws. 'I remember the last one,' Bryn had said yesterday with that certain emphasis in his voice. Was this woman the reason he remembered so well?

She was being a fool, she tried to tell herself desperately, but the suspicion remained. For a man like Bryn there would always be other women because there always had been other women. He could no more stick to one than fly.

She found herself watching the two of them after that, counting the number of times they seemed to manage to drift together. Too many for coincidence, that was certain, and always with that look of shared intimacy. Her name was Carol Brandon, she discovered from Adam, who looked at her rather oddly when she asked.

'She's married to an oil man herself,' he added. 'He's in Saudi Arabia at present. Unfortunately there aren't any facilities for wives.'

'She must be very lonely,' Lisa said, and he shrugged.

'We all do our best to include her in anything going, but she's a pretty balanced character anyway.' The pause was brief but telling. 'Why the interest?'

'Oh ...' it was her turn to shrug ... 'she reminds me of someone I know, that's all.'

One of the other men asked her to dance after that, and she lost sight of Bryn for quite some time. Inevitably when she did see him he was dancing with Carol, holding her far closer than was surely necessary. In a burst of sheer blind resentment, she deliberately moved closer to her own partner, sliding her arms about his neck and smiling into his somewhat surprised but by no means reluctant face.

'I love this kind of music, don't you?'

She flirted with him outrageously for the rest of the tape, not even sure—and not particularly caring—who he was. She knew they were attracting attention and didn't care about that either. Let Bryn have a taste of his own medicine!

Adam came and took over as another tape was inserted in the deck, drawing her a little to one side of the dancers' corner in the huge lounge. His normally good-humoured features held a trace of discomfiture.

'If you must dance like that, choose your partner with discretion, will you,' he said. 'You were giving Alan's wife enough rope to hang him with just now.'

'I'm sorry, Adam,' she said on a subdued note. 'It was only meant to be in fun.'

'No, it wasn't, it was meant to make *your* husband sit up and take notice. And I'd say you succeeded. He looked about ready to come and break things up a moment ago.'

Lisa bit her lip. 'Is that why you came over?'

'Yes.' He looked at her for a moment before adding diffidently, 'Mind if I give you a little advice?'

'No.' Her voice was muffled.

'Well, it's no pearl of wisdom, but you're a very lovely girl and you don't need to be jealous of anyone. Carol could give you a good eight or nine years.'

'I know,' she said softly.

'Well then ...' oblivious to any underlying meaning in the agreement. 'Bryn is the envy of us all, I can tell you.'

Lisa made herself smile. 'You'd better not let Irene hear you say that!'

Relieved, he smiled back. 'No, perhaps not. Sorry if I got on my high horse a bit just now.'

'I think I asked for it.' She added wryly, '.And thanks for stopping me making a fool of myself. Do you mind if we sit the rest of this one out?'

'Be glad to. I'm not a dancer, as you might have gathered.'

Lisa avoided Bryn's eyes for the rest of the night, but could not avoid the knowledge that she was going to have some explaining to do when they were alone. But then so did he. However obvious her own motives, his were still suspect.

The last guest departed around two. Closing the outer door for the last time, Irene gave vent to a sigh. 'I love having them, but I always wonder if it's worth it when I see the mess! Anybody want coffee?'

Lisa shook her head. 'Not for me, thanks. I'll take some of these glasses through to the kitchen.'

'Oh, leave it for tonight. We can tackle it better in the morning after a good sleep. Nobody else want anything? Good, because I'm about dead on my feet.' Yawning, she started for the stairs. 'See you later.'

Lisa met Adam's glance and said quickly, 'I'm not tired yet. At least I could clear the lounge tonight.'

'You heard what Irene said.' Bryn was right behind her, not touching her but emanating a cool hard purpose that was almost tangible. 'Go on up.'

She offered a reluctant goodnight to Adam and went, hearing Bryn add something low-toned to the other man before following her. Only just ahead of him on reaching their room, she crossed to the dressing table and began pulling out the securing pins from her hair with surprisingly steady fingers. Bryn closed the door quietly.

'You ever make an exhibition of yourself like that again,' he said, 'and I'll put you across my knee.'

Resentment flared in her, making her reckless. 'Have you any idea how pompous that sounds?'

'I don't give a damn how pompous it sounds! I mean it. If Adam hadn't stepped in when he did I would have done, believe me.'

'I'm surprised you even noticed.'

'You wanted me to notice. That was the whole idea, wasn't it? I don't suppose it occurred to you to consider Alan's wife and how she might feel about seeing her husband making a fool of himself.'

Lisa took out the last pin and let her hair fall down about her face, glad of its semi-concealment. 'An exhibitionist and a fool,' she murmured to her reflection in the mirror. 'Quite a partnership!'

He was across the room to her in a couple of strides, taking her by the arm and whipping her round to face him, eyes glinting with anger. 'If you want that spanking right now you're going the right way about it!' He shook her hard, jerking her head back. 'Grow up, for God's sake!'

'And be the kind of woman you prefer—Like Carol Brandon, for instance?' Her face was flushed beneath the tumbled auburn hair. 'I don't know if it's true that gentlemen prefer blondes, but you certainly do. And if you think *I* made an exhibition of myself you should have been watching the two of you!'

'Carol was telling me about conditions in Saudi Arabia,' he said between his teeth. 'Her husband happens to be on contrast out there. She hopes to join him soon.'

'Almost next door. You'll be able to visit.'

The anger died suddenly from his face, leaving a kind of weary resignation. 'What's the use?'

Something grew in her as he turned abruptly away, a tight hard knot deep down in the pit of her stomach. There had been finality in his tone as if he had reached the end of his tether. She wanted to reach out after him and say she was sorry", but pride wouldn't let her. All she could find to say as he got to the door was, 'Where are you going?'

He didn't even turn. 'Out,' he said. 'I need to clear my head!'

Lisa stood where he had left her for almost a minute listening to the sound of his feet going down the stairs and the opening of the front door. The knot had grown until it filled every part of her, hurting like nothing had ever hurt before. She had done it now; they were finished; through. It had been in his face, in the look he had given her as if seeing her clearly for the first time. And he was right, she had acted childishly tonight: a foolish, jealous, possessive little girl who took everything at face value.

Going to clear his head, he had said, but she doubted if he meant with fresh air. More likely he was going to take the car and burn up his disgust in speed. Her imagination leapt horrifyingly ahead, urging her feet suddenly towards the door as she saw the vehicle hurtling through the night- darkened countryside, heard the screeching of tyres as he took a corner too fast, the shattering impact. The house was set across a- large corner plot with the double garage and drive on the far side of it. To get out on to the main road, Bryn would be forced to drive along the front and up round the corner. If she used the side door she could head him off, make him stop, tell him she'd been an idiot, a fool—tell him anything if he would only come back.

She could hear the car engine as she ran down the stairs and along the hall to the rear corridor, the revving alone indicative of his frame of mind. There was a bolt on the side door which wasted vital seconds.

Somehow she tore it open and was through and running out across the path to the grass, seeing the car out of the corner of her eye already turning out of the driveway to parallel her progress.

She reached the low boundary wall as he came round the corner and went straight over it, leaving one of her sandals behind as she did so. Then she was in the road and waving her arms, blinded by the oncoming headlights.

Tyres skidded on loose gravel as brakes were hastily applied, and the car swung away from her, but too late to miss her altogether. Lisa felt the impact lift and toss her like a rag doll, yet there was no pain. Vaguely, from a long, long distance away, she heard the sound of running feet, then someone was turning her gently over where she lay on the hard tarmac. She knew it was Bryn because she could hear his voice saying her name on a ragged note of distress, but she could neither open her eyes nor move her limbs, only lie there limply with her mind held in shock.

'Someone else arrived,' hands were passed over her and somebody said, 'No bones broken so far as I can tell. Can you carry her into the house, Bryn? Adam is phoning for a doctor;'

'There may be internal injuries,' came the rough protest.

'I don't think so. I saw the whole thing from the window. You only caught her a glancing blow. You mustn't blame yourself, Bryn, she ran straight out in front of the car.'

'I know. I shouldn't have left her the way I did.' He was lifting her as he spoke, cradling her in his arms with her cheekbone pressed against the rapid beat of his heart. 'You don't realise just how much someone matters until something like this happens. If I'd killed her ..

'She's going to be all right.' That was Irene again. 'Look, she's coming round!'

It was not so much coming round as recovering her senses, feeling the numbness fade and pain encompass the whole of her right side. A moan broke from her involuntarily. This time when she passed out it was for real.

After that everything seemed to happen in a haze. Some stranger came and examined her arm and side while she lay on a settee in the lounge, then she was lifted again and carried upstairs to the bedroom she had occupied with Bryn these last few nights. Irene undressed her with a little help from the doctor, then something cool was applied to her bruises and lightly covered and she was between the sheets with the sedative she had been given downstairs already beginning to work.

Irene hovered over her, smoothing the hair from her eyes with a gentle hand. 'Go to sleep now, darling. There's nothing to worry about.'

'Bryn ...' It was a whisper she could barely recognise as her own voice. 'I want Bryn.'

'I'm here.' He came and took her hand in both of his, the warmth of his skin penetrating the coldness of hers. His face was too far away to see his expression properly, yet somehow it didn't matter.

'I love you,' she said, and it was like a weight being lifted from her heart as she drifted into sleep.

It was broad daylight when she woke again. Bryn was sitting in a chair a few feet away from the bed, reminding her vividly of that other morning and that other bed. There was no sense of shame any more, only a certain regret that it had happened that way.

He got up when he saw her eyes were open, and came to her, the angular, arrogant face smiling the kind of smile she had never dared hope to see on it.

'Hi,' he said. 'How do you feel?'

'Fine,' she began, then she made a small movement and let out a gasp as every muscle cried out in protest.

'You're going to be stiff and aching for quite a few days,' Bryn advised. 'To say nothing of black and blue. I suppose we should count ourselves lucky you got away with bruising.'

Lisa tried to laugh and found even that painful. 'Well, at least it's in a different place from where it would have been if you'd given me what I was asking for last night.' She looked up in the grey eyes and felt her throat contract at the memory of his weary disgust when he'd walked out on her. 'I'm sorry, Bryn—but Carol reminded me of Andrea. I think that's why I went over the top.'

'Not without some cause,' he responded on a wry note. 'It just isn't in me to treat an attractive woman like one of the boys, and probably never will be. But it doesn't have to mean anything.' He sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed, taking her hand and lifting it to his lips. 'I love you, Lisa, and I never said *that* to anybody before in my life. I want to take care of you, darling. Will you believe me now when I tell you I didn't arrange to meet Andrea in Tunis, or take advantage of her being there?'

'If you'll believe I never let Mark make love to me.'

'I never really thought you had. It was knowing you'd gone to another man for help in getting away from me that dug so deep. I was in love with you then, but I wouldn't admit it because you didn't seem capable of loving anybody with any depth.' He paused a moment, putting out a hand to her face, tracing the fine line of her jaw. 'When Adam rang to say you hadn't turned up at Heathrow my first reaction was "Let her go". Pride, of course. You'd turned your back on me. Then I put an agency on to tracing you, but they came up blank.'

'So you finally came to look for me yourself.' Her voice was soft. 'Oh, Bryn, I'm glad you did. I might still have been in that poky room and that boring job!'

'Turning the male staff inside out.' His smile was warm. 'I'm grateful your first love had an ambitious streak.'

'He wasn't,' she said. 'You're my first love. My first real love.'

'And your last—or I'd better be.' He stirred restlessly, expression rueful. 'I can't even kiss you properly for fear of hurting you.'

'What's a little pain?' she smiled. 'I want you too, Bryn. Now and always.' And that, she thought as he put his lips to hers, was only just long enough.