

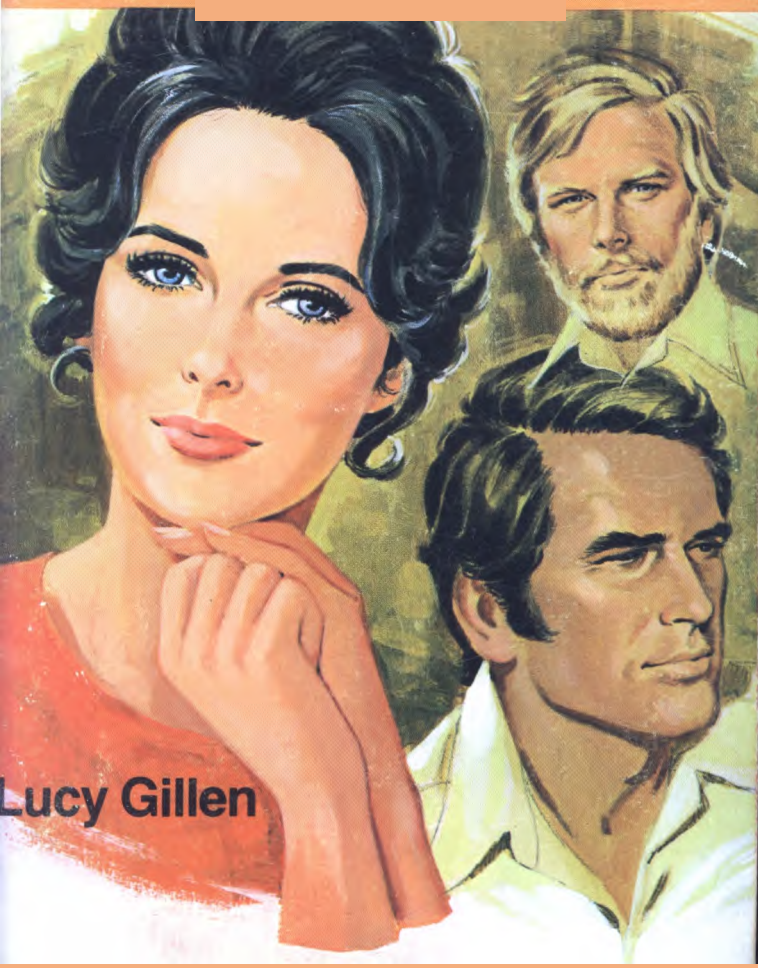


A

MANCE

ME

TO



Lucy Gillen

# MEANS TO AN END

by LUCY GILLEN

Alison and Danny couldn't get married unless they had some of Alison's money — but it was all in the hands of her trustee, Stefano Illari, who wouldn't part with it.

Alison knew she would somehow have to get on the right side of Stefano, but she disliked him so much. How could she possibly manage it?



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## CHAPTER ONE

ALISON GRAY sat hugging her knees and gazing out at the calm, sun-warmed face of the sea below her. From her place on the very top of Creggan Head she could *see* for miles, and the view never failed to enchant her, no matter if she had lived within walking distance all her life.

What looked like an incredibly long way down, and to her left, Creggan Creek poked its long, shiny grey finger inland, curving round to encompass Tulley's Bend and the cluster of little houses that looked just as if someone had painted them there against their background of green.

Right from the point above which she sat, round as far as she could see, Creggan Bay curved in a wide, glittering sweep, holding in its arms the yellow-sanded beaches, barely licked by the rippling calm of an incoming tide, and the twin resorts of Leethorpe and Skarren, looking much more beautiful in the evening heat haze than they did in closer reality.

Alison sighed and shrugged her shoulders, a gesture meant to dismiss the realisation that Creggan Bar lay no more than fifty yards behind her on the wide, windswept headland. Standing in splendid isolation like an ancient fortress against the pale blue of an early summer sky, it could look mellow or grim, according to the prevailing elements.

Alison's great-grandfather had built Creggan Bar as a rather ambitious monument to his business

success, and with the grand idea that he was establishing a dynasty of Grays in this wild and beautiful part of the coast, but his dream had received its first blow when his only son was killed at the very end of the first world war.

His grandson; also an only child, married fairly late in life, but the old man had once more cherished his dream when a child was expected, and Alison had never been left in any doubt that she was a bitter disappointment to him because she was not a boy. The final and shattering blow had come when, less than two years after Alison was born, her father was fatally injured in a train crash, reducing the Gray dynasty, by which he had set such store and made such plans for, to one small girl.

True, the old man had married again, an Italian widow with whom he had apparently been quite happy for a time, but it was much too late in life for there to be other sons and he had died six months ago, a bitter and unhappy man, and not even asking to see his great-granddaughter.

He had been an immensely wealthy man, although he had lived almost frugally for the past few years. Just how wealthy had not been realised until the will was read and all his assets accounted for. It was then discovered that he had left only half his vast fortune to his widow, and the rest divided equally between Alison and his stepson, Stefano Illari.

It had been something of a surprise to Alison to find that he had left her anything at all, for the old man had never shown any interest in her during his lifetime. That he had made her co-heir with his

stepson, she could better understand, for Stefano Illari was possibly the nearest he had ever come to leaving a son to follow him.

The one drawback to the inheritance as far as Alison was concerned was that her share had been left in trust, to be administered by his stepson, so that for the rest of her *life she* would always have to apply to Stefano Illari. It was a situation that she found almost unbearable at times, and it had been because of a fruitless request for money that she had come out here to sit alone with her anger and frustration.

The *ensuing* quarrel *had* been bitter *and* angry, mostly on her part, she had to admit, for Stefano seldom lost his temper. Not for the first time she almost regretted coming to live at Creggan Bar, although usually she loved being there.

The house was half hers, and she had made up her mind that she would live there. That he had also decided to do the same had been not only a surprise but rather annoying too, but she had overcome the more obvious difficulties by inviting a widowed aunt to come and stay there too, as a sort of chaperone—a move that seemed to amuse her co-heir.

She was furious now that he had refused to consider her request for several thousand pounds, and she had come out to sit on Creggan Head, vowing violence against the man who had thwarted her plans, hers and Danny's. Aunt Celia liked Danny and *she* had been quite pleased when Alison announced her intention of marrying him. Unfortunately for Alison, however, Aunt Celia liked Stefano

Illari even more than she did Danny, and instead of support for her plan, as she had expected, Alison had found her hoped-for ally siding with the enemy, declaring herself not in favour of so much money being handed over so casually.

It had all seemed so simple when she and Danny had talked about it, planned it in every detail and decided it was just right for them. Danny Clay was the son of an old friend of her mother's, and he and Alison had known each other since schooldays, although it was rather an erratic friendship. They had taken little notice of one another until about eighteen months ago when Alison's aunt had given a twenty-first birthday party for her, and Danny had been among the guests.

He had been flatteringly attentive the entire evening, vowing that she was much more beautiful since the last time he had seen her three years before, when he had gone away to university. Without doubt she was a very lovely girl, with short, curly dark hair and blue eyes as wide and guileless as a child's, fringed with dark lashes that gave them an attractive, smudgy look. If she was below average height, her figure was so beautifully proportioned that it was as eye-catching as the rest of her. She was used to being admired, but somehow Danny Clay had struck a responsive chord in her, and since the party they had seen each other quite frequently.

Then, three weeks ago, Danny had asked her to marry him. He had been nervous and a little humble, because he said he had not much money and they would have to live quite poorly for a while at least. But he had plans for opening his own



garage in time, and then everything would be all right.

Of course Alison had insisted that she could more than afford to buy the garage for them now, and what was hers was his. Danny had objected at first, saying that he could not possibly allow her to spend her inheritance on him, but finally he had allowed himself to be persuaded, and Alison had gone to Stefano Illari with high hopes.

Until now, she had to admit, he had been fairly easy to persuade when she had asked for money. Nine times out of ten he had made no demur at all and she had had what she wanted, although she hated having to ask for it. Now, however, when it was so very important to her and Danny, he had refused to let her have the amount she asked for, and had even inveigled Aunt Celia on to his side.

She hunched her knees up under her chin and tried to think of ways and means of outwitting the Machiavellian holder of her purse-strings, but could think of nothing. If only he would decide to go back to Italy, as his mother had done ! Perhaps at long distance he would prove less unbending. Maybe in the softer clime of his own country he would mellow—he might even fall in love and marry, and *that* might soften him, make him more ready to see her point of view.

Impatiently she shpok off such daydreams. After three months of living under the same roof as Stefano Mari she doubted if he was capable of ,mellowing at all, and particularly not to the idea of love and marriage. He was insensitive, callous, and quite indifferent to anyone's comfort but his own-

and she hated him.

A glance at her watch showed it to be just about six o'clock and dinner was in less than half an hour, but she was prepared to suffer the pangs of hunger that were already gnawing at her empty stomach, rather than sit down to dinner with him. Aunt Celia, she hoped, would understand how she felt. After all, if a grown woman of more than twenty-two could not assert her independence now and again, things were coming to a pretty pass.

It was almost twenty minutes to seven when she finally decided that her independence had been asserted sufficiently to allow her hunger to be appeased, and she got up from the warm softness of the turf and brushed down her frock, running careless fingers through her short curly hair before setting off for the house.

If she looked ill-used enough, Mrs. Dawlish, the cook—housekeeper, would surely find it in her heart to give her dinner in her room. She was a kindly soul, and quite fond of Alison, although she too was very obviously taken with the dark charms of her employer.

The whole of the fifty yards or so to the house was uphill and she knew that if Stefano and Aunt Celia were having dinner they would see her coming, for the wide, high windows of the dining room gave a perfect view down the grassy slope to the sea. It was instinctive, therefore, when she lifted her chin in a gesture of defiance as she walked across the sloping lawn to the house, feigning not to notice the two figures, quite plainly visible, in the white-walled dining room.

She opened the door and went through into the cool stillness of the house, blinking for a moment to clear the blurring sun from her vision. The stairs were to her right, and the dining room door immediately to her left as she came in, and she noticed that the door was slightly ajar.

One hand on the newel post at the foot of the stairs, she stopped short when she heard her name called, loudly and peremptorily, and she would have recognised who the caller was even if she had not already known, by the accent he put on the middle syllable of her name.

She hesitated a moment, deciding whether or not to answer, and he called again. 'Alison! '

With a resigned shrug and an expression of stubbornness already set on her face, she crossed the few feet to the door and opened it wider, standing there in the doorway, looking across at him. He stood by the sideboard, a glass of wine in one hand and a frown on his dark, fine-boned face, while Aunt Celia sat, meekly it seemed, at one end of the table, her fingers busy with the stem of her wineglass.

Alison raised a questioning brow and met the black-eyed gaze he fixed her with, with as much aplomb as she could muster, although she could feel the blood racing fast through her veins, almost as if she was afraid of him.

'Why are you not ready for dinner?' he asked in that same peremptory tone, his eyes condemning the short print frock she wore, and the untidy mop of her hair, as quite unsuitable for the dinner table.

Alison shrugged. 'Because I don't feel like any dinner,' she said, which was becoming more and

more untrue, as her empty stomach kept reminding her.

The dark eyes, watching her so closely, glittered like coals, and she realised with a flash of anger that he was as much amused as angry. 'And you did not think it necessary to let your aunt and myself know that you would not be having dinner with us?' he asked, and Alison flushed.

It was a maddening habit that she had thought herself growing out of, but since the advent of Stefano Illari it seemed to have returned with interest. She looked across at her aunt and smiled ruefully. 'I'm sorry, Aunt Celia, I should have let you know I wouldn't be in. But you could have started without me.'

'You think we have such bad manners?' Stefano suggested softly. 'You know better than that, *piccola*.'

Alison frowned, partly because of his use of that maddening nickname he insisted on using, and which she suspected was used for the sole purpose of reminding her of her youth. 'I *have* apologised for being late and for not telling you,' she said. 'Now please do start your meal, and don't wait any longer.'

'But, darling,' Aunt Celia said, before he could say anything, 'aren't you going to eat? **You** must be hungry.'

'No.' She shook her head firmly, and would have gone out of the room without 'more ado, but he came across to her. He seemed not to hurry, but his long, easy stride brought him close enough to put a hand on her arm before she could even turn around.

'It is not good for you to go without food because

you are sulking.' he informed her, in his precise, careful English. 'You will have dinner with us.'

Alison wished fervently that she had the nerve to hit him, but he always gave her a helpless feeling of vulnerability, and she merely looked up at him angrily, her blue eyes shiny with temper and frustration. 'You will let go my arm,' she told him in a voice that sounded annoyingly shaky and unsure of itself.

'You will have your dinner?'

She stuck out her chin. 'Yes—in my room.'

*'I think not!'* *He was silent for a moment while*

he studied her carefully, then he reached out behind her and closed the door. 'You are not an invalid,' he told her quietly. 'You will eat with us like a civilised human being. Now please sit down so that I can ask Mrs. Dawlish to serve dinner.'

His hand still on her arm, he propelled her across the room to the table and pulled out a chair for her. But just because the horse had been led to the water it did not mean he was going to drink, and Alison refused to be pushed down on to the chair. Instead she shook her captive arm and glared at him. 'Stop

*bullying* *as he bullied her all*

to be pushed around just as it suits you. Now let go

*my arm!* *To her surprise he did as she asked, but*

there was a deep, ominous glow in his eyes that she refused to be frightened of.

'Very well,' he said quietly. 'You can go hungry, it is your affair.'

'I won't do that,' she assured him. 'Mrs. Dawlish will find me something if I ask her.'

He was smiling when he reached for the bell push,

and Alison knew, without a shadow of doubt, that he was about to deliver the *coup de grce*. 'Mrs. Dawlish,' he informed her without raising his voice, 'is employed by me, and she will do as *I* say, Alison, not you.'

'Oh, you——'

One long finger pointed downwards at the chair she still stood beside. 'Sit down and eat,' he said softly. 'You cannot win, *piccola*.'

She cast a last appealing glance at Aunt Celia and, to her dismay, saw laughter too in the eyes that sympathised with her predicament. 'Much better have your dinner, darling,' she consoled her. 'There's really no sense in cutting off your nose to spite your face, is there?'

Still with the smell of turf on her fingers and with her hair uncombed, Alison ate an almost silent meal, although Stefano and her aunt were garrulous enough on a number of subjects, a fact she noted with vexation. She ate everything that was put before her, because she was really hungry despite her protests, and while she ate she vowed **vengeance** on her tormentor.

It was bad enough that he treated her like a **re-calcitrant** child, but to do so in front of Aunt Celia was the last straw. She was rather disappointed in Aunt Celia, she thought. She was really quite **old** enough to know better than to side with such an arrogant, bullying creature as Stefano **Illari**, no matter if he was, at times, almost startlingly attractive.

She looked at him now, from the shadow **of her** lashes. Tall and lean, with none of the inclination to obesity that many of his race had at his age, he was

perhaps in his mid-thirties. His hair, black of course, grew fairly long in his neck and flicked upward just above his collar, curling very slightly over his ears and above a high, patrician brow.

Straight black brows worked expressively when he was animated, as did his long, clever-looking hands. His eyes were as black as coals and whenever he was amused they glowed with laughter, giving his lean, high-cheeked face a devilish look that was probably a large part of his attraction. In other circumstances, Alison thought, she might have found him irresistible—as it was she disliked him intensely, almost hated him at times.

As if he sensed her scrutiny, he looked across the table at her, and smiled curiously. 'Alison?' That was another thing she was wary of, she thought. The strange, lilting sound he gave to her name. That barely perceptible accent was all too much of an asset to him, and she had no doubt he did not hesitate to make the most of it.

She hastily lowered her eyes, placing her spoon and fork carefully side by side, as if it demanded all her attention. If you'll excuse me, Aunt Celia,' she said, pointedly ignoring him, 'I'm seeing Danny, and I have to wash and change before I go out.'

'Yes, of course, darling.' Aunt Celia glanced at Stefano, as if she expected him to object, or at least to make some comment, which he did, of course.

'You have to break the bad news to him?' he asked, and Alison glared at him angrily, her hands clenched.

'I have to tell him that, thanks to the—the stupidity of an old man's will, a married woman can't even

spend her own money as she pleases.'

One black brow flicked upwards and the wide, straight mouth lifted at one corner in a wry smile. 'You are not yet a married woman, *piccola*,' he said softly.

'And **I** never will be, the way you're **going on**,' Alison retorted.

He smiled again at that, so that she would have liked nothing better than to throw something at his smugly complacent head. 'Does your marrying depend upon your getting the money?' he asked. '**I** did not realise that.'

Getting the gist of his meaning with no trouble at all, she glared at him. 'No, it does *not*!' she told him angrily. 'How dare you make such a suggestion about Danny? He isn't a—a fortune-hunter, and you've no right to imply that he is.'

'**I** did not imply anything at all,' he denied, but that betraying gleam of laughter showed that he was amused by her hasty defence of Danny, and she clenched her hands tightly.

'One of these days,' she threatened, 'I shall *hit* you, Stefano, I swear **I will**!'

There was nothing else, she decided, that it was possible to say after such an obvious exit line, and she stuck out her chin and walked out of the room, uneasily aware of the black-eyed laughter that followed her.

Danny was already waiting for her down on the sea wall, and she smiled to herself when she saw him. Anybody less like the man she had been quarrelling with it would be difficult to find, for Danny still



retained much of his student image. He had changed neither his personal appearance nor his mode of dress to any extent since he came down from the university, over a year ago.

He was taller than Alison's five feet one, but he did not tower over her, and he was stockily built, with a round, boyish face disguised in part by a soft, curly brown beard. Even at not quite twenty-three his fine brown hair was already thinning near the crown, and he wore a permanently half defiant look, as if he constantly expected criticism.

He had won his way to university on merit alone, and had gained another year with honours, but since leaving he had, somehow, failed to find the right niche for his talents and had tried a number of different jobs with no spectacular success so far.

It was his passion for cars and car engines in particular that made him ambitious to own his own garage, and Alison's heart sank dismally when she saw him standing there, leaning against a stone bollard, his head bent so that he had not yet seen her coming. It was not going to be easy to break the news to him that she could not, after all, give him the money he needed to go ahead with his plan, and she knew him well enough to know that he would be bitterly disappointed and make no secret of it. Not that she could blame him, of course. She had promised the money and she should have made some tentative enquiries of Stefano first, before committing herself so firmly.

Danny looked up as she came closer, and she saw the way his light blue eyes lit up with pleasure at the sight of her. He wore his customary blue jeans

and a tee-shirt, despite the fact that she had taken the trouble to change before she came out to meet him, but she did not mind that. It was Danny, after all, and she would not have him any other way, so she smiled as she reached out to clasp the hand he offered.

'Am I late?' she asked. 'I hope not.'

Danny shrugged; he never bothered too much about time. 'You're here,' he told her with a smile, 'that's all that matters.' He squeezed her hand and drew her closer to him while he kissed her. It was a brief and rather perfunctory kiss, but Danny was not an emotional man, and she knew he must be anxious to know about the money for the garage. After all, so much depended on it for both of them.

She felt a certain chilling sense of panic when she thought of telling him, but she tried not to let it show. Danny put an arm round her and she put up a hand to hold the one that rested on her shoulder, knowing her fingers were dry and nervous and wondering if he noticed, as they walked along the sea wall in the dwindling daylight.

'I'm—I'm afraid I have a disappointment for us,' she ventured at last, and felt the way he stiffened suddenly, and the way the muscles contracted in the arm across her shoulders.

'Oh?'

'I spoke to Stefano about—about the money for the garage.'

He did not look directly at her, but she saw the darkening look on his brow as he guessed the answer she had received. 'And he turned you down.'

Alison nodded. 'I'm afraid so.'

For a moment he said nothing and she thought, she hoped, that perhaps he was going to take his disappointment quietly; but Danny was not one to be deprived of something he really wanted, not without making a great deal of noise about it. 'Damn him I ' he said vehemently at last, his free hand making a fist and striking at the empty air. 'What right has that—that blasted foreigner got to tell you how to spend your own money? What right has he got to be so damned high-handed? Tell me that.'

'I wish I could,' Alison said ruefully, knowing how he must be feeling. 'I was furious with him.'

'Does he know we're getting married?'

Again she nodded. 'Yes, I told him. I told him what we wanted the money for.'

'It's just not right,' Danny declared, anger and frustration making his normally quiet voice loud and harsh. 'Surely when you marry, you should have control of your *own* fortune, not have to go cap in hand to some damned Italian for every penny.'

'Married or not,' she told him, 'he controls the trust—for good, as far as I can gather.'

'What does your aunt say about it?'

Alison pulled a rueful face when she remembered Aunt Celia's position in the matter. 'I'm afraid she seems to agree with Stefano,' she told him. 'I'm afraid Aunt Celia is a conquest.'

'A conquest?' He looked puzzled, and Alison laughed uneasily, wondering if she had done the right thing in mentioning that. It would surely not improve Danny's opinion to know that even she had to admit that Stefano Illari was undoubtedly attractive, despite her dislike of him.

'He's a very attractive man, Danny,' she told him, 'and Aunt Celia's not past noticing it.'

'You think he's attractive, too?'

She hesitated over her answer, then nodded. 'I can see that he'd be attractive to most women,' she told him, as matter-of-factly as she knew how. 'He's tall, dark, and not without charm when he puts his mind to it.'

'Oh, I see.' His lip curled, and Alison could imagine all the derogatory images she had conjured **up** in his mind. 'The continental fascination, eh?'

'Aunt Celia seems to think so.'

He was silent again for some time, and she wondered what was causing that faraway, slightly speculative look in his eyes. They walked along the sea wall for some distance, then turned down a side street where the street lamps were already coming **on** in the growing dusk.

'Is he a——' He shrugged expressively. 'Does he like the women?'

Alison looked at him curiously. 'I'm not sure,' she said. 'He goes out quite a lot, and—well, **I** should *guess* he probably does. Why?'

Quite surprisingly he chuckled, and she looked up at him, frowning. 'I think **I** might have an idea for getting us our money for the garage,' he told her. 'It might just work, if you're prepared to try it.'

She nodded, wondering what on earth he was talking about. 'I'm prepared to try almost anything,' she said. 'Within reason, of course.'

'Even be nice to him?'

Alison stared at him blankly for a moment. 'Be

nice to him?' she echoed. 'I—I don't understand, Danny.'

'Darling!' He turned her to face him, his hands tight on her arms, his light blue eyes shining in the yellow light from the street lamp as he looked down at her. 'We want to get married, don't we?' She nodded. 'And we want to start off right, with our own business?' Again she nodded, realising at last something of what he was leading up to, and not at all sure that she liked the idea at all. 'Then just be—nice to him, darling, that's all.'

'But, Danny—' She looked at him, shaking her head. 'I—I don't think I could

He pulled her close and hugged her for a moment, as if to reassure her, his voice muffled by her hair when *he* spoke again. 'Alison love, you know I hate the idea of you being within a mile of him, but it's one way to get what we want, and at the moment it's the only thing I can think of.'

'I'm not sure he'd—he'd *want* me to be nice to him,' she said doubtfully. Not—not the way you mean, anyway. He looks upon me as a little girl rather than a grown woman, you know. After all, he *is* quite a bit older than we are, and he probably likes something tall, blonde, and sophisticated.'

'I wasn't proposing that you should seduce him,' Danny told her bluntly. 'Just—change your tactics a bit, that's all. You quarrel with him now, don't you? Well, try being more amenable for a change. Do as he wants, let him think it's all going his way and then work your charm on *him*. He's only human, darling, even if he is a bit older and more worldly wise, and you're a very beautiful girl. Isn't

it worth a try?'

'I—I suppose so.'

He lifted her chin and looked down at her with a persuasive smile, his lips brushing her forehead and her mouth. 'Isn't it worth it for our very own place, my darling Alison?' he asked softly, and she put her arms around him suddenly and hugged him tight.

'Yes, yes, of course it is.'

'Of course it is! ' He tightened his arms around her, one hand pulling back her head so that he could reach her mouth. 'Of course it is ! ' he whispered against her lips, but while he was kissing her, Alison's mind was spinning chaotically with the completely irrelevant question of what it would be like to be kissed by Stefano Illari.

## CHAPTER TWO

IT was going to be more difficult than Danny had anticipated, Alison thought. Being amenable and not arguing with Stefano Illari would not come as easily to her as Danny had seemed to think. For one thing, she was never very amenable to anyone who treated her like a not very important member of the household, especially when she was half owner of the house. It was not only annoying of him, but presumptuous.

In fact it seemed to Alison that he was far more inclined to act as if Aunt Celia was the mistress of Creggan Bar, and went out of his way to be charming and considerate to her. Altogether, she thought, Aunt Celia had been rather a disappointment to her and, seeing them together now in the garden, she wondered just who her aunt would side with if it ever came to a real showdown, and loyalties must be declared. It was something Alison would not care to take a chance on at the moment.

They sat together now, her aunt and Stefano, in the shade of a huge elm that had somehow managed to survive nearly a century of gusty winters on the exposed headland, and now provided shelter from the heat of the sun. Lunch was usually a light, al-fresco affair when it was bright and sunny as now, and a table had been set out under the elm tree ready to be laid with a meal when Mrs. Dawlish had prepared it.

At the moment Alison sat on the stone step of the french window, hugging her knees and wondering about Stefano and her aunt, as she waited for her lunch. Aunt Celia had always dressed well and taken care of her appearance, but lately it seemed to Alison that she was taking even more care than usual.

She had visited a hairdresser and her dark brown hair was set in a much more flattering style than it had ever been before, while a blue, sleeveless dress revealed arms still smooth and slim for all her forty-two years. She was laughing animatedly at the moment, at something her companion had said, and she looked, Alison freely admitted, a very attractive woman.

Stefano had been riding, as he often did in the mornings, and he was still wearing riding breeches and a dazzlingly white shirt that showed off his dark looks to a definite advantage. It was a setting and a costume that suited him well, and she thought he was fully aware of it as he relaxed elegantly in the wrought iron chair, one leg crossed over the other, smiling at Aunt Celia with smooth self-confidence.

It was unlike him not to have changed for lunch by now, Alison thought, and frowned over the implication of that. It was quite possible, of course, that he was finding her aunt's company sufficient distraction to forget his rather strict social graces.

After all, there was probably no more than seven or eight years between their ages, and many men are attracted to a slightly older woman. It was not impossible that they might even find one another attractive enough to        But there she hastily put



on the stop, for she could not easily assimilate the idea of Stefano Illari as her uncle.

He had, she noticed suddenly, left his seat under the tree and was coming towards the house, his dark, lean features still drawn into a smile, as if he found the world absolutely to his liking. The expression of his smile changed when he saw her sitting there, and he cocked a brow at her.

'You are hungry for your lunch, Alison?' he asked and, giving her no time to answer, 'I will not be long changing.'

She got up from the step to allow him to come through the french window, and he gave her his hands to help her to her feet, holding them still, even when she would have moved away. 'I—I think I must have misjudged the time,' she told him, feeling suddenly shy and uneasy as she all too often did when he spoke to her like that, and especially so now with Aunt Celia's eyes on them from the garden.

He laughed softly, and kissed the fingers of her left hand, an unexpected and disturbing gesture. 'You are always ready for your food,' he teased her. 'And yet you never grow plump, *piccola*. You are lucky.'

'I suppose I am,' she allowed, and glanced at her aunt, down there in the soft green shade of the elm tree. 'I'm like my mother's family, I think. She was very slim and so is Aunt Celia.'

The black eyes spared Aunt Celia a long glance and he smiled. 'Such a beautiful household,' he said in his soft, deep voice. 'No wonder I stay here instead of returning to Italy, huh?'

It was a question Alison was interested in herself, why he did not go back to Italy, and she thought this might be as good an opportunity as any to air her curiosity—albeit cautiously. 'Are you going to stay in England for good, Stefano?' she asked, and he looked at her speculatively before answering.

'You would not mind?' he asked then, unexpectedly, and Alison blinked for a moment, uncertainly.

'I—I don't mind,' she told him. 'Why should I?'

He shrugged, an expressive gesture that told her more than his words did. 'I wondered.'

Alison eased her hands free, and folded them together in front of her, keeping her eyes downcast enough for the heavy lashes to hide her eyes. 'It's your house as much as it is mine,' she said, with uncharacteristic meekness. 'You can stay as long as *you* choose, Stefano.'

For a moment he said nothing, then one hand reached out and cupped her chin, lifting her face although she refused to meet his eyes. 'What are you up to?' he asked softly, the unfamiliar phrase sounding oddly out of place in his precise English. 'For the last two or three days,' he went on, 'you have been so—so good.'

Alison felt resentment prickling, no matter how hard she tried to suppress it. 'Good?' she echoed, and he laughed.

'A good little girl,' he explained. 'Not arguing, not being obstinate about anything. Very—good.'

She felt the colour flush into her cheeks and her hands tightened their clasp on one another as she fought with a rising anger. It was all very well for

Danny to tell her to be amenable, but he was not being talked to as if he was no more than two years old.

'I thought most people *liked* children to be good she retorted, and, after a second's stunned silence, he laughed.

'That is more like you,' he told her, and actually sounded as if he approved.

'You don't seem to be able to make up your mind,' she told him tartly. 'First you object when I stand up for myself, now you sound as if you prefer it when I do.'

He was still smiling, undeterred by the angry frown she wore. 'You have a lot of spirit,' he said, almost as if he was discussing a horse, she thought wildly. 'I do not like to see spirit broken.'

She stuck out her chin, as best she could for his still having a hand under it. 'It would take more than you to break my spirit,' she informed him with far more confidence than she felt, and again he laughed.

'I would never try to do so,' he told her softly. 'It is part of your charm, *piccola*.'

'And I wish you wouldn't call me that—that name,' she said, taking advantage of her opportunities.

*Pica)la?*' He looked surprised at her objection.

'I don't know what it means, but I suspect it's not very complimentary.'

He shook his head slowly. 'It is not uncomplimentary,' he said, and Alison looked at him expectantly, waiting for an explanation, but he merely smiled.

'What *does* it mean?' she asked, and he allowed his gaze to wander slowly over her face before **he** answered.

'Just—little one,' he said softly, and she hastily lowered her eyes again.

She moved her head, trying to rid herself of his touch which she found inexplicably disturbing, but his fingers were hard to evade and he held her chin firmly, smiling down at her. 'You—you'd better go and change for lunch,' she told him at last, and put up her own hands to pull at his.

'**I** will.' He held her for a moment longer, then smiled enigmatically and, before she realised his intention, bent his head and brushed his mouth against her forehead. '*Bella bambinal*' he said softly, and strode off through the sitting room towards the stairs.

For a moment or two, Alison stood there, trying to do something about the erratic and quite illogical way her heartbeat was tapping away at her side, then she turned, hesitated briefly, and walked down to join Aunt Celia under the old elm tree. Her aunt looked up at her with a smile as she approached, her grey eyes perhaps a little curious too.

'I'm glad to see you and Stefano getting along a bit better the last couple of days,' she observed, by way of greeting, and Alison shrugged.

'Are we?' she asked, unwilling to pursue the subject.

Aunt Celia put her neatly coiffured head to one side and studied her for a moment thoughtfully. 'I thought you seemed to be,' she said. 'Maybe **I** was wrong.'

Alison sat down opposite her, wondering just how frank she dare be with her aunt. After all, Aunt Celia had made it pretty clear lately that she saw eye to eye with Stefano on most things, and she did not want to risk having hers and Danny's plans to get the money, relayed to the object of their plan.

'I don't think I've been any different, have I?' she asked, studiously avoiding the watching eyes.

'Oh, you have, darling,' her aunt insisted. 'In fact Stefano was remarking on it to me, only just now.'

'Oh, was he? Is that what you were laughing at?' She knew she sounded almost spiteful when she asked that, and Aunt Celia looked at her wonderingly.

'No,' she said quietly. 'That wasn't to do with you.'

'I—I'm sorry.'

They sat for several minutes in the shade of the old trees, an uneasy silence between them, then Aunt Celia reached out a hand and gently squeezed her fingers. 'I wish you liked Stefano,' she said. 'It seems so—so unfortunate that you should be always quarrelling with him.' Grey eyes looked at her almost appealingly across the narrow table. 'Couldn't you try to like him, Alison, even tolerate him? That would be a start.'

Alison met her gaze steadily, remembering her earlier thoughts about her aunt and Stefano, and wondering how much the plea was influenced by her own feelings for him. 'Is that what you do, Aunt Celia?' she asked. 'Tolerate him?'

Aunt Celia shook her head. 'No,' she said quietly. 'I like Stefano, darling, and I make no secret of it.'

'Better than you do Danny,' Alison guessed wryly, and her aunt smiled.

'He's an older man, darling, and if I may venture to say it, much more attractive than your Danny. **To** me at any rate.'

'I see.'

'I doubt if you do, my dear,' her aunt told her gently. 'I've never been very drawn to the student type, even when I was of an age to be, and quite frankly I'm surprised you are.'

Alison stuck out her chin, refusing to hear any ill of Danny. 'Danny isn't exactly a student type,' she denied, wondering in what other category she could place him. 'He—he's different, that's all.'

'And you love him?'

Alison nodded. 'I'm going to marry him.'

'With or without the garage?'

She nodded, but this time a lot less certainly. '**I—** I wish I hadn't to ask Stefano for every penny,' she said bitterly. '**I** sometimes wish Great-Grandfather hadn't left me anything at all rather than made me go to Stefano for everything—it's—it's humiliating! It isn't my money at all, it's his, and I can't touch a penny of it without asking **him**. **I hate** having to ask for any at all, and this time he's so—so stubborn about what is very important to Danny and me.'

Aunt Celia looked at her for a long moment, a half amused, speculative look in her eyes. 'You could try coaxing it from him,' she said at last, and Alison stared at her for a moment in disbelief. It had been surprise enough when Danny suggested more or less the same thing, but to hear Aunt Celia proposing such tactics was quite staggering.

'You—you mean—you're suggesting that I should——'

'Oh, I don't mean anything improper,' Aunt Celia interposed hastily. 'But if you were to try being a little more——'

'Amenable ?' Alison suggested wryly, seeing two minds with but a single thought, and not at all sure that she liked being thought of in such a light by either of them. 'I'm surprised at you, Aunt Celia.'

'Are you, darling?' Her aunt's dark brows flicked upwards in elegant comment. 'I should say that Stefano is very open to a bit of feminine persuasion.'

Alison pursed her lips thoughtfully, taking the plunge and hoping she was not being too precipitate. 'You wouldn't mind if I—tried to persuade him?'

Aunt Celia smiled. 'Why should I mind, darling? It's all in the family, after all.'

They had almost finished lunch and Alison looked at Stefano from the concealment of her lashes, as they sat over coffee. He had changed into a light suit and a pale blue shirt and she thought, yet again, how attractive he looked and how easy, even pleasurable, it should have been to make herself pleasant to him, but always that niggling resentment sat in the back of her mind.

'I thought I would drive out to Peggs Bay this afternoon,' he was saying to Aunt Celia, and something in Alison urged her that this was the moment to take advantage of. The time to make the most of the opportunity presented to her.

'Alone?' she asked, before Aunt Celia could speak, and they both turned and looked at her

curiously, silent for a moment.

Then Stefano smiled, one brow tilted questioningly. 'I was hoping for company,' he said. 'I was going to ask Celia if she would come with me.'

Alison felt her stomach crawl with embarrassment and she wished the floor would open and swallow her up. It was obvious what she had been going to suggest and he had pointedly ignored the suggestion and invited Aunt Celia.

'Oh, I'm sure she will,' she said brightly, as if her own inclusion had never even entered her mind, and got to her feet. 'Well, I'd better go and write to Grandmama. I should have done it days ago, so I'd better strike while the iron's hot.'

'Alison!' Aunt Celia called after her as she reached the door, and she turned, rather reluctantly.

'Don't stop me,' she begged with exaggerated fear. 'If I don't go and start right away, I shall only get sidetracked again.' She waved a hand as she closed the door, 'Have fun I '

She closed the door rather hastily behind her and knew without a doubt that she left an uneasy silence in the big, sunny room. But at least, she thought wryly as 'she went upstairs to her room, they would now be aware that she realised how things were between them.

The letter to her grandmother was a short but affectionate one, as it always was, the old lady bore with her laxity as a correspondent, as long as she knew she was all right. It took her no more than half an hour and while she was writing it she thought she heard the sound of a car leaving, but did not bother to look out of the window to see them go.



***It would kill*** two birds with one stone, she decided as she licked a stamp, if she took it down to the nearest post box and posted it right away. She could do with a breath of fresh air and a spell away from the house, so the walk would do her good.

As she came downstairs it seemed there was no one about, so it had evidently been the two of them leaving when she heard the car, and she thought a little enviously of the warm sandy peace of Peggs Bay on such a lovely sunny afternoon. It was only about three miles further round the coast and Stefano kept a recently acquired motor launch there, although she had never yet seen it. No doubt they would soon be skimming over the bright water and enjoying the cool breeze their speed created, content in each other's company.

She walked down the steep, green slope to the few straggling buildings that made up Creggan Bay, and posted her letter at the unbelievably tiny post office. Coming away from the letter box she spun round sharply, when a car horn shattered the quiet, her eyes wide with alarm.

Stefano smiled at her from behind the wheel, dark glasses obscuring his eyes and the light jacket he had worn at lunch slung carelessly on to the back seat of the car. While she hesitated, he leaned across and opened the passenger door.

'Get in,' he told her.

'But——'

'Please, I am blocking this narrow street.'

It could scarcely have mattered, she realised too late, for there were no other cars in sight and only two pedestrians, strolling along on the other side of

the road, but she got into the car beside him, and said nothing for several minutes as they drove off. She could not imagine what had happened or why he was alone, unless Aunt Celia had simply decided not to go with him, and that was unlikely in the circumstances, she thought.

'I thought you were going to Peggs Bay with Aunt Celia,' she ventured, after several minutes, and he shrugged eloquent shoulders without taking his eyes off the road.

'If you had been in less of a hurry to run away,' he told her, 'you would have heard that your aunt has an appointment with her dentist in Skarren.'

Alison frowned. She had quite forgotten that her aunt had the appointment, and she should have stayed and listened to her when she called her back. Not that it would have altered her own feelings in the matter, for he had quite plainly snubbed her in favour of Aunt Celia and she could still feel resentment when she thought of it. What she was now doing with him in his car, she could not quite understand, although she had had very little choice in the matter, it was true.

'I'd—I'd forgotten,' she said, and he smiled.

'You were in such a hurry to get out of the room,' he reminded her, rather tactlessly, she thought. 'As if you were anxious to escape for some reason.'

'Nothing of the sort,' she denied hastily. 'What on earth should I be escaping from?'

Again he shrugged expressively, and he was heading straight for the coast road to Peggs Bay, she noticed. 'Who knows with you, *piccolla*?' he asked lightly. 'But you will come with me to see my boat,

won't you?'

'Do I have any choice?" she asked tartly, and he laughed.

'Not much, *bella mia!*'

They drove on along the coast, the road sometimes running at the same level as the sea, and at others swooping upwards to look down over a drop of nearly a hundred feet, and all the time the sparkling ocean and yellow sanded beaches lay invitingly in warm sun, so that it was all too easy to slip into a sensuous, relaxing lethargy that made her heavy eyes almost close as she sat back and enjoyed it.

Stefano was a good driver—a little flamboyant perhaps, but she felt perfectly safe with him as they took blind, hairpin bends at speeds that would normally have kept her on the edge of her seat. The wind they created whipped her cheeks into soft, bright colour and tossed her hair into gamin-like confusion round her face. It was a beautiful day and she could think of no better way of spending it than like this.

Perhaps sensing something of her mood, Stefano turned his head briefly and smiled at her, and it was a smile that stirred something responsive in her so that she lay back her head on the seat and laughed softly for no real reason at all.

'You like driving?' he asked, and she realised suddenly that this was the first time she had ever ridden with him.

'I like it when someone else does the driving,' she told him.

'Ah, I see.' He smiled knowingly. 'You are lazy. huh?'

'Not necessarily,' she denied, with surprising mildness. 'I've just never had the inclination to drive, that's all.'

'Would you like to learn?'

The question was unexpected, and she considered it for a moment. 'I don't know,' she said at last. 'I'd probably be useless.'

'You could try.'

'*I could.*' She turned her head lazily and looked at him through her lashes. 'Are you offering to teach me?' she asked.

He said nothing for a moment or two, then he laughed softly. 'Would you let me?' he countered, and she considered it for a moment carefully.

'You're a very good driver,' she said then, without committing herself either way.

'*Grazier* She ignored the hint of sarcasm.

'Have you done a lot of driving?'

'Quite a lot,' he said with a wry smile. 'I have done some racing in my time, although not recently.'

'Oh I ' She wasn't quite sure how to react to that. 'I'm sorry, I didn't realise.' It came as something of a surprise to realise that he had had an existence before coming to Creggan Bar, and she supposed it only went to show how narrow her own outlook was.

'You would not have heard of me,' he told her with a smile. 'I was not one of the big names. Only an—an——'

'Also-ran?' she suggested, and wondered if she was being too derogatory, but he only laughed quietly at the suggestion.

'That is it—an also-ran.'

'But you raced often?'

'Quite often.' He turned his head briefly and smiled at her. 'Quite often enough to be capable of teaching you to drive,' he told her.

'Oh, I don't doubt it,' she said hastily, and he laughed again.

'But your—friend would not like it,' he suggested.

'My fiancé,' Alison said firmly.

'Does he have a car?'

'Not at the moment.' She made the admission reluctantly.

'Ah, I see. But if I allow you to buy this garage for him, he will then have one, hmm?'

Alison flushed, seeing all too plainly the way his mind was working, and seeing too the end of any hopes of introducing the matter of the money in her own way and in her own good time. 'Not necessarily,' she said, trying not to sound too annoyed about it. 'The garage will be our means of earning a living, not a luxury, as you seem to think, Stefano.'

An expressive brow flicked upwards. 'You would work in the garage too?' he asked.

'Why not?' *she* challenged, and he smiled.

'Why not?' he echoed. 'You would be very good for sales, *piccola*.'

'There won't *be* any sales,' she retorted, 'if you don't let me have the money to buy the garage.'

'And you really want to be a greasy little *meccanica*, huh?'

'Not particularly,' Alison said tartly. 'And you don't have to sound so blessed condescending, Stefano.'

He laughed softly. 'Forgive me, *piccola*, but I just cannot see you poking around in the insides of a car, with your pretty face covered in oil and grease, and covered from head to toe in dirty overalls.'

She said nothing for a moment, not particularly enchanted with the idea herself when it was put as bluntly as that. Then she shrugged. 'I could cope,' she said.

'And he would let you?'

She immediately resented the implied criticism of Danny, and rued the loss of her pleasant lethargy of a few minutes ago. 'You don't know Danny at all, Stefano,' she told him. 'And I don't think you should make snap judgments without seeing the person concerned.'

'Then why do you not bring him to house?' he asked. 'He could come to dinner one night, could he not? You would like that?'

'Yes. Yes, of course I'd like it,' she said, but was not at all sure that Danny himself would share her enthusiasm. He was unused to such surroundings as Creggan Bar, and certainly he would not be very enthusiastic about sitting down at the same table as Stefano. Especially if he thought there was some ulterior motive behind the invitation, and he was bound to suspect there was.

'Then ask him, *piccola*.'

She was silent for a while, trying to decide what would be best to do. Refuse the idea outright and make Stefano suspect her reasons, or ask Danny and almost certainly have him refuse. **ask him,** she said at last, as they ran down into Peggs Bay, and he glanced at her briefly, as if he guessed some-

thing of her indecision.

They parked on a pull-in just off the narrow road, and she looked across to where a sleek, shiny motor launch was moored to the quay, bright and new and impossible to overlook. Peggs Bay was a rather unsuitable setting for such ostentation and the expensive-looking craft stood out startlingly amid the mellow, everyday practicality of the little fishing village, and the trawlers, dark and tubby, bobbing on the rising tide, a beautiful dove among the crows.

'This is yours?' she asked, as he led the way, dropping down nimbly into the white-painted boat with its gleaming brasswork, warm as gold in the sunlight, and surrounded by the smell of newly varnished wood.

'It is,' he affirmed, and she felt a sudden quickening of her pulse when she noticed the name *Piccola* painted in gold along the bow. 'She is beautiful, is she not?' he asked softly, a smile in his black eyes as he reached up to lift her down into the boat beside him. 'Just like her namesake.'

'She—she's lovely.'

'You like boats?'

She nodded. 'Although I've never been in anything as—as luxurious as this.' She looked around her, impressed in spite of herself, and feeling suddenly more lighthearted as she stood there, swaying gently with the motion of the boat on the tide. Some strange, inexplicable excitement was already stirring in her and the urge to be away, speeding across the water with the wind in her face.

Stefano was watching her, smiling as if he understood exactly how she felt, and shared her excite-

ment. 'We will run along as far as the creek and back,' he decided, evidently not deeming it necessary to consult her as to whether she wanted to go or not. 'It is a beautiful day and we will make a breeze as we go along.'

It was very tempting indeed, and she was honest enough to admit to knowing of no good reason why she should not go with him. After all, who could object? Both Danny and Aunt Celia had suggested that she should be amenable, and by going with him in the boat that was exactly what she would be, so she nodded.

Not, she realised a moment later, that it would have made the slightest difference whether she agreed or not, for Stefano had already set the powerful engine purring richly into life, and was casting off under the critical but apparently satisfied *eye* of a couple of local fishermen. They nodded their heads in acknowledgment when Alison looked up and smiled at them, and she felt suddenly very rich and pampered as she sat on the long leather seat while Stefano guided them out to sea.

It was amazing how different the coast looked from the offshore side, she thought, as they skimmed over the water, making creamy vees of foam on the blue where their bow wave curled back swiftly before them. The wind was cool and fresh on her face and lifted her short hair, tumbling it into a riotous mass blown back from her face.

Stefano handled the boat as well as he did the car, and she thought ruefully that he was probably one of those men who did everything well or not at all. She watched him as he stood at the wheel, his long



legs braced, feet slightly apart, *his* black head lifted to the wind as hers was, strong brown hands guiding the boat easily, or so it seemed.

He turned back after a while and smiled at her, a raised brow implying that she should come and join him, and she went, clinging on warily as the boat bounced over the water. 'You would like to take her?' he asked, and Alison stared at him for a moment.

'Oh no!' she said then, realising what he meant. 'I—I couldn't handle it.'

'Of course you could!'

He moved back from the wheel without taking his hands off it and she slid in front of him, seeing no future in arguing with him. He put her hands, one at a time, on to the wheel and covered them with his own, and she experienced the thrill of control over the speeding craft, even though it was second hand.

They were rapidly approaching the creek, she could see the shining swathe it cut into the coast-line only a short distance ahead, and Stefano bent his head to speak close to her ear. 'I had better take it now, *piccolo*, we shall be turning soon.'

She relinquished her hold almost reluctantly, and went and sat on the seat again, wondering if she would ever have another opportunity of coming with him. She had always enjoyed messing about in boats, although she had never before been in anything remotely resembling this shiny, powerful beauty. Perhaps, she mused as she watched their wash swathe past the side, she might even have one herself. She could afford it, and surely Stefano would be in sympathy with that sort of acquisition.

Thinking of that reminded her that it was unlikely Danny and she would be able to afford luxuries at all, especially if Stefano still refused to let her buy the garage, and she sighed—audibly, although she did not realise it. Stefano turned and looked at her curiously, but he said nothing.

Instead of turning right round to go back to Peggs Bay, as she expected, he took them right across to the mouth of the creek and along it for some two hundred yards, then cut the engine and tied up at a wooden-topped jetty. Alison looked at him curiously, as he held down a hand to help her ashore.

They appeared to be at the bottom of someone's garden, as far as she could tell, and she frowned her curiosity when he started up the slight slope of grassland towards a house some fifty feet back. 'Where are we?' she asked, and he smiled.

'Creggan Creek.'

'I know that,' she retorted. 'I mean where is this house, why are we here?'

'To see the house,' he told her, and stopped about twenty feet in front of the building, taking off his sunglasses and gazing at the rather shabby exterior speculatively. 'It has prospects, do you not agree?'

Alison stared at him, uncertain just what she was expected to say. Why on earth he should want to come and look at some rather unprepossessing house on Creggan Creek, she could not imagine, and she meant to find out. 'I'm not sure,' she told him.

'You do not like it?'

Alison took a deep breath and turned to look at him, frankly curious. 'I don't know whether I do or not,' she said. 'And quite frankly, Stefano, I can't

quite see why it matters one way or the other. Why have you come to look at this place?'

He looked down at her for a moment, an oddly reticent expression in his eyes, as if he was uncertain if he should confide in her or not. 'I am thinking of buying it,' he said at last, and Alison drew in a breath sharply.

'Oh—I see.'

'You see the setting it has?' He seemed not to notice her reaction, but waved an expressive hand to encompass the house and its surroundings, and she was forced to notice that there were trees thickly clustered round the building, as if to protect it. Tall, mature trees in the full beauty of their summer foliage, and darkly sombre against the bright blue of the summer sky and the peeling white exterior of the house itself.

'It—it's quite lovely,' she agreed, a little shaky voiced. 'But—' She bit her lip when he turned again and looked down at her.

'But, *piccola*?' he said softly, and she met his eyes with a look not only of curiosity but uncertainty.

'Why do you want to buy another house?' she asked. 'You have Creggan Bar.'

'I have half of Creggan Bar,' he corrected her gently.

'You'll have it all soon, when Danny and I are married,' she told him.

'Will I?'

'Well, we can't live there. Not afterwards, I mean——'

'I know what you mean, *piccola*,' he said softly, and she thought dizzily, he probably did. He prob-

ably realised that Danny would never be able to settle in a house like Creggan Bar.

'Don't—don't you like the house?' she asked, and he nodded.

'But this one,' he said, as if to himself, 'reminds me of home.'

She looked at him for a moment, sensing a wistfulness about him suddenly that she would never have expected in him. 'Home?'

He smiled, putting an arm round her shoulders as he drew her on up the grassy slope to the empty house. 'It is set in a glade of trees, and it looks at the sea,' he told her. 'When it is painted and altered to my requirements it will be beautiful, you will see, *bella mia*.'

'But, Stefano—' She had been going to ask him why he did not go home if he was as homesick as he appeared to be, but he drew her on, his arm tight about her shoulders, his eyes on the sad-looking old house.

'It will be beautiful,' he said softly.

## CHAPTER THREE

**ALISON** was a little uncertain how much she should say to her aunt about Stefano's plans to buy the house on Creggan Creek, if indeed he had any firm plans for buying it and was not just indulging in speculation. He had not asked for secrecy, but she had a feeling that Aunt Celia did not know anything about it, or she would almost certainly have mentioned it to her.

It was just possible, of course, that he was thinking of buying the other house for when he and Aunt Celia were—but there she stopped hastily, shaking her head, as she always did when she faced the prospect of Stefano becoming her uncle by marriage. It was something she was strangely unwilling to anticipate and she tried to put it out of her mind as she walked down the hill to meet Danny.

Stefano had suggested that she ask Danny to the house for dinner one evening, and she thought tonight was as good a time as any to broach the subject. He was waiting for her as he nearly always was, by one of the bollards on the sea wall, and she waved a hand in greeting as she came the last few yards.

'Missed me?' he asked, after he had kissed her, and she nodded, smiling. He had been away all the previous day, and stayed overnight with a friend of his in Leethorpe.

He took her hand and she looked at the boyish features, half hidden behind the short beard. 'Did

you have any luck?' she asked, and he shrugged.

'Not really. The chap wasn't interested when he found I had a degree.'

'Oh, Danny, what a shame '

He shrugged again, seemingly less interested in the fact that he had lost yet another job than in something else he had in mind. 'It happens.' He tightened his hold on her hand as they set off to walk along the sea wall at their usual easy pace, Danny's head bowed to watch their combined footsteps. 'There was something, though, darling.' He glanced at her briefly before resuming his study of their feet. 'A garage on the Leethorpe road.'

Alison's sigh was barely perceptible, but it was there. The garage was a dream that Danny would not easily relinquish and she foresaw little hope of Stefano ever changing his mind about the money, no matter what tactics she used. 'How much is it?' she asked, as if it made any difference.

'Reasonable.' He quoted a price, and her heart sank even further, for it was in excess of anything he had found so far.

'But, Danny,' she said, 'that's much more than any of the others.'

'I know.' He sounded as if he resented her mentioning it. 'But it's a much better place, and right on a busy road. The turnover is enormous, and it would pay for itself in no time.'

'But——'

'Have *you* had any luck yet?' he asked.

'No. At least I don't know really.'

He looked down at her with a kind of shrewd sharpness in his light blue eyes. 'What do you mean,

you don't know?'

'Well—' She hesitated, wondering if she could convey to him some small, subtle change she thought she had seen in her relationship with Stefano. It was nothing she could really put a finger on, but ever since she had visited the house on Creggan Creek with him two days ago, she had sensed a new, somehow more easy feeling between them. Of course it was probably nothing but her imagination playing her tricks, and anyway it was very unlikely that Danny would understand if she told him, so she merely shook her head. 'No,' she said, 'I haven't had any luck, and frankly, I don't think I ever will, Danny.'

'You've scarcely given yourself much time yet,' he observed. 'Keep trying, darling, you never know with *his* type. He might have a soft spot somewhere.'

Alison looked at him, a little hurt by his insistence. 'Why don't *you* try asking him yourself?' she suggested. 'You could explain the details and the financial complications better than I could. Come up to Creggan Bar for dinner one evening, and meet Stefano, then you can ask him.'

Danny looked at her as if she had suggested something quite outrageous. 'Come up there to dinner?' he echoed. 'You must be joking, Alison.'

'No, I'm not.'

'But I couldn't come visiting Creggan Bar, you know I couldn't. It just isn't—well, I couldn't, that's all.'

'But why on earth not?' she insisted, and he frowned.

'I'll tell you why not,' he said, his fingers crush-

ing hers as he gave vent to his emotions. 'For one thing I don't have a dinner jacket, and for another I never mix with—with that sort. I wouldn't know what to say to them.'

'Oh, Danny, what nonsense!' She looked up at the frowning face and the stubborn way his chin was set against the idea. 'You talk to me,' she pointed out, gently because she realised that there was more than just stubbornness behind the rejection. 'I'm that sort, Danny, and as far as dinner dress is concerned we don't go that far. Stefano just wears an ordinary lounge suit and Aunt Celia and I wear our ordinary dresses.'

'An ordinary lounge suit?' Danny echoed bitterly. 'I saw Illari drive past me once at a rate of knots, but not so fast I hadn't time to notice that his suit would have paid for the whole of my wardrobe, and left some change.'

'Oh, Danny!'

She looked so unhappy at his response that he pulled her into the concealing shadow of a concrete shelter and kissed her. 'I'm sorry, darling,' he said. 'But—well, I just wouldn't fit in up there.'

She raised huge, appealing eyes and used them shamelessly, her mouth softly pouted while she drew invisible patterns on his tee-shirt with a fingertip. 'Please, Danny.'

He said nothing for several minutes, but she could sense his weakening, and at last he pulled her into his arms and laid his face against her hair, a great soul-searching sigh vibrating through him. 'All right,' he said at last. 'I'll come, but don't blame me if I do all the wrong things and let you down.'



'Oh, of course you won't 1 ' She kissed him on his bearded jaw and hugged him. 'You've been as well taught as I have, Danny, and we're just people, you know. Creggan Bar isn't Buckingham Palace.'

'**You're** not just people,' Danny told her, his words whispered warmly against her lips. 'You're special, darling. You're very, very special.'

'I haven't seen Danny Clay for ages,' Aunt Celia said, when Alison told her of his coming visit. 'It must be nearly six months.'

'He hasn't changed,' Alison told her. 'He's still the same old Danny.'

Aunt Celia looked at her steadily for a moment, 'I seem to remember he was a bit of a rebel,' she said, and Alison nodded reluctantly.

'I suppose he is,' she admitted. 'He doesn't like being—conventional about things, he believes in being—well, free.'

'Well, at least he's going to marry you,' Aunt Celia observed dryly. 'I'm thankful his ideas of freedom don't include living in sin with you.'

'Aunt Celia!'

Her aunt smiled and reached for her hand, squeezing it reassuringly. 'I'm only teasing you, darling. Does Stefano know he's coming?' she added, and Alison nodded.

'As a matter of fact it was his idea that I should ask Danny to come,' she told her. 'Although he *doesn't know that I've actually asked him yet.*'

'Stefano suggested you ask him?' Aunt Celia's elegantly shaped brows expressed surprise. 'I wonder why.'

'Because of what I said to him, I suspect,' Alison said. 'I told him he shouldn't make snap decisions about people without meeting them first, and then he suggested I should ask Danny to come to dinner one night.'

'I see.' She looked a little doubtful still, and Alison frowned.

'You don't mind if he comes, do you, Aunt Celia?' she asked.

'Good heavens, darling, of course not!' her aunt exclaimed. 'Anyway, it's nothing to do with me. The house is yours and Stefano's, not mine.'

The statement had a strangely intimate sound to it, and it also reminded Alison again of the house at Creggan Creek. She debated, yet again, whether or not to tell her aunt about it. It could surely do no harm, she thought, for as far as she knew Stefano had no particular desire to keep his prospective purchase a secret.

'Did you know that Stefano's buying another house?' she asked, and saw the brief, surprised lift of Aunt Celia's brows. 'At least,' she added hastily, 'he's thinking about it.'

'Is he?'

So he hadn't told her, Alison thought, and for a moment felt a slightly sick feeling in case she had done something unforgivable in betraying the news. 'I don't know if—if it's generally known,' she said cautiously.

Aunt Celia crossed her slim legs and leaned back in her chair. It was difficult to guess what she was thinking, but Alison thought that the news about the other house was quite a surprise to her, possibly

even a shock, and she reminded herself to tread carefully. 'Well, he's told *you*, anyway,' her aunt said, and reached for a cigarette.

'Actually,' Alison ventured, unsure if she was making things worse, 'he took me to see it a couple of days ago. When we went to Peggs Bay.'

'Is it in Peggs Bay?'

Alison shook her head, committed to telling the rest now that *she* had gone so far. 'No. We went along the coast in his boat, as far as Creggan Creek. It's about two hundred yards along the creek, on the left-hand side.'

'Oh!' Again surprise sent those elegantly curved brows upwards. 'Not Barmon's old house, surely?'

Alison shrugged. 'I don't know, I never quite knew *where* they lived, but it could *be*, I suppose. It's quite a big place and it's empty and rather scruffy-looking, but Stefano says it re——' *She* stopped herself there, unwilling to betray that brief glimpse of homesickness she had witnessed, although she could not have said why. 'He says it has possibilities,' she said.

Aunt Celia looked more puzzled than ever. 'What about this place?' she asked. 'Creggan Bar. What does he propose doing about that? Is he going to move out and leave you in sole possession?'

Alison shook her head. She was beginning to wonder just how much Stefano had confided in her aunt, and there was something vaguely disturbing, nagging at the back of her mind. 'I told him I shan't be here,' *she* said, and once more Aunt Celia's expression questioned her meaning. 'Danny wouldn't live here,' *she enlarged. 'He'd never live here.'*

°But why on earth not?

'Oh, Aunt Celia!' she said, shaking her head. 'He wouldn't be easy here, you know that.'

'I see. And you wouldn't mind?'

Alison shrugged, not a little uneasy herself when she really thought about living with Danny somewhere as yet unspecified and probably very different from Creggan Bar. 'I'd live where Danny was,' she said.

'Of course.'

Then Alison understood at last. Aunt Celia was thinking of her own position, and where she would be if she and Stefano did not come to some arrangement. She loved it at Creggan Bar and she would miss the life perhaps far more than Alison would, although it was something that she did not think about too deeply or too often for fear she was less than loyal to Danny and his ideals.

'Oh, Aunt Celia!' She left her own chair and came and sat on a stool beside her aunt, taking her free hand and seeking to reassure her. 'You'll always be welcome to stay with me, wherever I am, you know that. Unless of course ' She looked at the smooth, well preserved features, inviting confidences, but Aunt Celia gave nothing away. If, indeed, there was anything to give away.

'Darling,' she said lightly, 'don't make a big issue of it. I'm not exactly paupered or homeless, you know, and—well, quite a lot can happen before you and Danny go trotting up the aisle, can't it?'

'Yes. Yes, of course it can.'

The hand that had been under hers smoothed back the hair from Alison's forehead, and there was

a small, quiet smile on her face. 'Then don't look so solemn, darling, and tell me which night your Danny is coming to dinner.'

Alison had forgotten about the matter of her learning to drive, until Stefano mentioned it, and then she looked at him a little dubiously, wishing she had some good reason for turning down the offer. He had caught her just as she was leaving the house for a walk and she wished now that she had been a bit quicker leaving her room and so avoided him.

'You do *want* to learn, do you not?' he asked when he saw her expression, and she did not answer for a moment.

'I—I suppose so,' she allowed at last, and looked up to see him smiling.

'You suppose so,' he echoed. 'Does that really mean no, *piccola*?'

'Well—I don't really mind whether I drive or not,' she admitted. 'As you said yourself, Stefano, I'm lazy and I'd much rather that somebody else drove while I rode.'

He laughed, shaking his head. 'You *are* lazy. You do not even ride a horse, do you?'

'No.' She stuck out her chin defensively. 'But I walk a lot, and that's good exercise. That's something you *never* do,' she added, and he regarded her for a moment in silence.

Then he took one of her hands in his and drew her across the hall to the door. 'Then I shall walk with you,' he said, and Alison looked at him in disbelief.

'You will?' she asked, and he nodded.

'I will.' He smiled down at her as he opened the

door. 'I do not perhaps walk as often as I should, so—' He shrugged expressive shoulders. 'You will encourage me to walk more often and I will teach you to drive in return, yes ?'

'If you want to.'

Her answer was not exactly encouraging, she realised, and he pulled a face at her. 'If you want to, *piccola*. You do not encourage me, but I will persevere.'

They walked down the steps and round the house to where the garden sloped away down the headland towards the sea, and she smiled, almost unconsciously, so that he squeezed her fingers and cocked a brow at her.

'You find that amusing?'

She laughed, shaking her head. 'No, not amusing, not really.'

'I wish I knew why it is that you go to such pains to avoid me,' he told her softly, and she looked at him, unsure whether or not she really did avoid him, as he said.

'I—I don't think I do try and avoid you, do I?' she asked.

'It seems to me that you do.'

'It could be your imagination.'

He looked down at her and laughed softly, still holding her hand in his. 'I hope it is,' he said. 'I would not like to think that you disliked me:

She was silent for a moment, considering just what she did feel about him. It was difficult to know exactly how she felt, especially when she considered him in the light of his possible connection with Aunt Celia.

'I don't dislike you,' she said at last.

But also you are not very sure that you like me either, huh?'

She did not answer at all this time, but smiled as she lifted her face to the sun and the breeze, her spirits lighter than when they had set out, and doing nothing about the hand that still held hers. It was a beautiful day and she was young enough to be able to dismiss everything but the immediate pleasure of enjoying it.

From the garden they walked down the steeply inclined path towards the beach, some distance below them at the moment, where the sea ruffled in the light wind and gleamed in the sun, the rolling green of Creggan Head behind them and to their right, with the occasional cluster of gorse and broom standing guard on the few scattered dwellings.

They said nothing, either of them, as they went down the path, but Alison had the feeling, instinctively, that Stefano was as delighted with what he saw as she was herself, and she cast him a brief, curious glance from under her lashes. 'Have you *ever* walked down here before?' she asked, and he smiled.

'No,' he confessed, 'I never have.'

'And you call *me* lazy 1'

'You come down here very often?' he asked.

'Sometimes, not always.'

'With Danny, perhaps?'

She glanced at him again, curious to know why he should have asked her that. 'No,' she said, 'not very often with Danny. We usually meet down in the village and we don't come this side at all much.'

'Does he like walking?'

'I suppose so,' she said. 'I don't really know whether he does or not. Not having a car he either has to walk or use a bus.'

'I see. Does he not mind that you are going to learn to drive?'

She laughed, wondering why he should display such a sudden interest in Danny. 'I don't know that I am going to learn,' she told him. 'You'd probably give me up as a bad job, anyway, before very long. I can be incredibly dense at some things.'

'Then I shall take a big stick to you, not give you up as a bad job.'

She levelled a steady, discouraging look at him, because her heart was thudding heavily and rather erratically at her side and she did not like feeling so close and intimate with him. It sounded ridiculous, but it frightened her.

'You wouldn't do that,' she told him, and he laughed, setting her pulses racing again, faster than ever.

'No?' he said softly.

It was much hotter down on the sand than it had been on the higher ground and the sun on the water was dazzling, so that Alison wished she had brought sunglasses with her. In fact she had meant to fetch them from her room before she came out, but meeting with Stefano like that had put it quite out of her mind.

'Whew l ' she said as they walked along the edge of the surf, 'it's even hotter than I thought.'

He smiled, rather condescendingly, she thought. 'You do not know what real heat is here,' he told her, and she pulled a face.



'Well, maybe not by your standards,' she retorted. 'But it's quite hot enough for me, I can assure you.'

'You do not like it hot?'

'Not *too* hot.' She looked at the fluffy, frilled ripple of the water on the sand and glanced at him enquiringly. 'I usually take off my shoes,' she told him. 'Do you mind?'

He smiled and shrugged. 'Of course not, why should I?'

She made a face as she bent to unfasten her sandals. 'I don't know,' she said. 'But you're pretty hot on the social graces usually. I wondered if it was quite the done thing to take off one's shoes and paddle.'

He reached across and took the sandals from her as she straightened up, a smile on his face that glittered in his black eyes. 'Am I as bad as that, *piccola*?' he asked softly. 'You make me sound such an-

Ogre?' she suggested with a mischievous smile, and ducked hastily out of reach into the water when he aimed one of her own shoes at her.

'Am I an ogre?' he asked, a few minutes later, and she turned and looked at him, wondering how much it really mattered to him if she thought he was.

'Not really,' she told him with a smile, at last. 'But then you don't really have the right to be one, do you?'

'Please?' He raised one black brow and was looking at her part amused, she thought, and part curious.

'Well, you're not really in charge of *me*,' Alison

explained. 'Only of my money.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Well, you're not, are you?'

He shook his head, slowly, looking not at her but at the sandals he was carrying. 'No, I am not,' he agreed quietly.

'And seeing the way you go on with the money,' she ventured, chancing his disapproval in a challenge she could not resist, 'I'm glad you're *not* in charge of me as well, or I'd be very cowed and subdued.'

He said nothing for a moment and she wondered if it was anger or hurt that kept him silent, almost wishing it was the former. Then he looked at her with his black eyes steady and quite serious. 'Do you really have such a bad opinion of me, *piccola*?' he asked softly, and Alison bit her lip, shaking her head almost before he had finished speaking.

'No. No, of course not, Stefano. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that.'

'But you are impulsive,' he said, and smiled, rather ruefully. 'That is what makes me think you *do mean* it, Alison, because you speak without thinking and it is then that people so often say what they mean.'

'Well, I didn't mean it, I promise I didn't.'

He shook his head, and said something in Italian which she did not understand but which sounded vaguely uncomplimentary, and she looked at him suspiciously. 'Now *you're* being Unflattering,' she accused, and he shook his head in denial.

'Not really,' he told her. 'Just passing an opinion.'

'What did it mean?' she asked, and smiled at him

in such a way that it was obvious she expected him to tell her.

He looked at her for a long moment, his eyes glowing with a deep, deep laughter and with something she could not quite recognise at the moment, then he laughed softly, and shook his head. 'It means that you would be very good, I think, at making people forgive you for almost anything you said. Especially if the offended one happened to be a man.'

Alison held his gaze for a moment, then turned suddenly and ran further out into the water until the creamy ripple of tide flowed about her ankles, suddenly and inexplicably nervous of him. After a moment or two she turned her head and looked across at him, his black eyes narrowed against the sun, but watching her steadily, then he held out a hand to her, like an invitation she found very hard to resist. But she did resist it and instead shook her head and raced on again through the cool, swirling water that showered about her in a spray, sparkling and glittering in the sun, until she was quite a distance in front of him.

Her thoughts were as busy and aimless as the swirling water and she stopped running suddenly and held her hands in front of her, almost like a prayer, while she told herself not to be such a little fool. She stood there until a long, dark shadow fell across the sand just above the tide line and she turned her head to look at him.

Without a word, he held out his hand again, and this time she hesitated only briefly, then walked up on to the dry sand and put her own hand in to his. They walked in silence and Alison could feel

some strange, stirring sense of excitement that disturbed her more than anything she ever remembered. It made her feel that she had reached a moment of great meaning to her, and that at any moment——

It was then that she cried out. There was very little that marred the smooth surface of Creggan's beach, but very occasionally picnickers found their way there and sometimes left untidy and dangerous souvenirs of their visit behind them. It was a section of broken glass bottle, just visible in the sand, that Alison had failed to notice now, and the sharp jab of it in her foot as much frightened as hurt her.

'Alison! '

Stefano turned and looked at her in stunned surprise, his eyes searching her face for reason for the outburst. 'My foot!' she said, gazing down at the injured member and seeing much more blood than the size of the cut warranted. 'I've cut my foot! '

He too looked down then, and in a second had lifted her off both her feet and carried her up on to a less sloping part of the beach, setting her down gently. 'Let me see '

'It—it isn't much,' she told him, wincing when he turned her foot to examine it, 'but it hurts a lot.'

He gave his whole attention to it for a moment, then glanced up at her and smiled reassuringly. 'You are right,' he told her, 'it is not too badly cut, but it is not good to neglect a cut foot, especially from treading on glass. We must take you to see a doctor, and he will give you an injection,'

Alison herself peered curiously at the small but

messy *cut*. 'It's not worth all that fuss,' she decided, although it was hurting rather. 'It's not worth bothering Doctor Fison with.'

'It most certainly is,' he argued determinedly. 'As the doctor will tell you. You could be very ill unless you have an anti-tetanus injection very soon.'

'Just for a little cut?' She looked at him disbelievingly.

'Just for a little cut,' he told her, and pulled a dazzlingly white handkerchief from his shirt pocket and folded it deftly into a bandage for her foot. 'There—now I will take you home and we will see about that doctor.'

He helped her to stand and then bent and lifted her into his arms, smiling when she gave a little squeak of surprise. 'I *can* at least walk back,' she said, far more worried about the way her pulse was racing, than about the damage to her foot. 'Give me my sandals, Stefano, I can walk.'

'You will not walk,' he decided quietly. 'Now please sit still or I shall probably drop you.'

He made his way back along the beach, where they had walked only minutes before, and she was increasingly aware as they went of how strong his arms were, and how close his face was to her own. It was a disturbing realisation and she did not look at him, but ahead to the steep sloping path up from the beach.

'You'll *have* to let me walk up the path,' she told him as they came towards it across the sand, but he merely smiled.

'Not at all,' he said. 'You do not imagine that I cannot carry a *bambina* like you, do you?'

Alison knew he was trying to make her look at him, but she firmly refused to turn her head, instead she stuck out her chin defiantly and hung on a little more tightly as he started up the path. 'All right,' she told him, 'show off if you insist.'

He laughed, a soft deep sound that she felt as vibration through her own body. 'Is that what you think?' he said.

She did not answer, but merely held on tightly with an arm around his neck, until he reached the top of the climb where he set her down on the grass. Alison smiled knowingly at him, as he sat down beside her and he laughed.

'So you think you have been proved right, huh?'  
'Haven't I?'

He merely smiled, reaching for her foot to check the temporary bandage, nodding his satisfaction over it. The wound felt a lot less painful now, but it was throbbing rather and she realised that seeing the doctor with it was probably, after all, the best thing.

After a moment or two he got to his feet and lifted her into his arms again, and this time she made no protest, although when they got nearer the house she did have some rather uneasy thoughts about Aunt Celia seeing them. 'I think you'd better put me down now,' she told him as they came up the sloping garden to the house. 'Aunt Celia might see us.'

He raised a brow, obviously at a loss to know why it should matter one way or the other. 'So?' he said.

'Well, I'd hate her to get the wrong idea,' Alison told him, and saw from the way he smiled that he was much less disturbed by the possibility than she was.

'The wrong idea?' he echoed, and Alison bit her lip, frowning at his manner.

'I mean,' she explained, slowly and carefully, 'that she'll probably think I've broken my leg at least, if she sees you carrying me.'

'Oh, I see.' He laughed and lifted her higher in his arms, obviously having no intention of letting her walk, no matter what arguments she produced.

'Then please put me down.'

'I think not.'

'Please, Stefano '

He shook his head, and she turned to see his eyes glinting wickedly at her, so disturbingly close she could see her own reflection in them. 'No, *piccola mia*,' he said.

'Will you\_\_\_\_

He silenced her very effectively and so unexpectedly that she could only stare at him when he smiled down at her again. 'Now will you please stop arguing with me?' he said softly. 'You should know me well enough by now to know that you cannot win.'

Alison said nothing, for she had just realised that Aunt Celia was standing in the doorway and watching them come, and Alison could have sworn that she was frowning.

## CHAPTER FOUR

IT was all very well saying that she should rest her foot for a day or two, and not walk about on it, Alison thought ruefully, but it was not much fun for her being more or less a prisoner in the house. For one thing it meant that she could not go down and meet Danny, and he was not on the telephone, so she was obliged to ask for help in contacting him.

It was doubtful if he would have a great deal of sympathy with her, and would probably tell her she should have looked where she was going, especially when he knew she had been with Stefano when it happened. In fact, she thought, it might be a better idea not to tell him the latter part of the story, in case he made more of it than need be.

Aunt Celia promised to be her messenger and suggested that she should ask Danny to come up to Creggan Bar and see her—a proposal that Alison heard with doubt. 'I doubt very much if he'll do that,' she told her aunt, pulling a wry face.

'But surely if you're hurt, he'll come and see you,' Aunt Celia insisted. 'I'll suggest it to him, anyway, and he'll be a sad disappointment, to *me* anyway, if he doesn't come.'

'Well, he won't,' Alison assured her.

Aunt Celia squeezed her hand reassuringly. 'Oh, I'm sure he will, darling. Don't you worry—I'm going down to the village, anyway, to see Mrs. Renshaw about a dress she's making for me, and I'll see



Danny while I'm clown there, or if he's not home, I'll leave a message for him.'

'Thank you, Aunt Celia.'

'You'll be all right until I get back?'

Alison smiled. 'Yes, of course I will. There's nothing really wrong with me at all. I'd simply have put a plaster on the cut and not bothered any more if Stefano hadn't made so much fuss about it.'

'Well, it seems he knew best,' her aunt told her. 'Doctor Fison said you did the right thing in calling him, and having that injection.'

'Well, anyway, injection or not, I refuse to be an invalid,' Alison insisted. 'I'm going to sit out in the garden and read, since there's nothing more energetic I can do.'

Aunt Celia dropped a light kiss on the top of her head, and smiled. 'Good idea, darling. I'll send Danny up to join you, if I can find him.'

'Thank you, Aunt Celia. 'Bye.'

She heard the car drive off and sat for a moment in the still coolness of the big room, then sighed mightily as she got to her feet and hobbled over to the bookshelves. It was more difficult than she would have thought, and quite painful too, trying to walk, although she would not have admitted it, and she hung on to the furniture as she crossed the room, using the side of her foot instead of the sole.

She felt frankly sorry for herself, for she would much rather have been out in the sun, doing something much more energetic like walking or swimming. Reading on a day like today did not appeal at all. She cast an uninterested gaze over the titles on the shelves, pulling out one or two and putting

them back when they failed to impress her.

She had thought she heard sounds in the hall, but put it down to Mrs. Dawlish moving about at her work, and she looked back over her shoulder only when the door opened. 'Oh !' She looked at Stefano

a little vaguely. Without quite knowing why, she had expected him to be with Aunt Celia, and his sudden appearance startled her for a moment.

'I thought you were resting that foot,' he said, by way of greeting, and she frowned, turning back to the bookshelves with a shrug.

'I thought *you'd* gone to the village with Aunt Celia.'

'Why?'

The question puzzled her and she turned again to look at him. 'I don't know,' she admitted. 'I—I just did, that's all.'

He stood just inside the door watching her and he was smiling, the kind of smile she found oddly disturbing, and viewed with suspicion. 'Ah, I see you are unhappy because you cannot be out,' he said, and Alison pursed her lips.

'So would you be, if you were cooped up here for days on end,' she complained.

'Days?' His head shook slowly. 'You have been here only one day so far,' he pointed out, and Alison frowned.

'It's quite long enough when the weather's so lovely,' she told him. '*I hate* staying in when it's fine.'

He eyed her for a moment or two steadily. 'You *are* feeling sorry for yourself,' he told her.

'Yes, I am She glanced at his hands in driving

gloves and her frown deepened. 'I suppose *you're* going out now?' she said, and he raised a brow, smiling at her.

'Do you mind if I do?' he asked, and she shrugged, leaving her opinion in no doubt.

'Why should I?' she asked, and looked reproachfully at him when he laughed. 'And I don't think it's particularly funny,' she told him.

'Oh, but neither do I, *piccola*.' he sympathised, and only his eyes betrayed his amusement still. 'I am going down to Peggs Bay for the boat. Would you like to come with me?'

She looked at him for a moment with wide, hopeful eyes. 'May I?' she asked.

'Of course, if you would like to.'

'I'd love to,' she assured him fervently, and turned her back on the bookshelves.

'You are very spoiled, I think,' he said with a smile as he came across the room to her, and she pouted reproach at him. 'And as we are likely to be gone for an hour or two you will sit here while I tell Mrs. Dawlish that you have gone with me, then Celia will not be wondering where you have gone to when she gets back.'

It did not even occur to her to remember the second half of Aunt Celia's errand, and if she was honest about it, Danny had never been further from her mind as she waited impatiently for Stefano to come for her.

He was gone only a minute and when he came back she found herself once more swept up in to his arms, her own going instinctively around his neck. 'You seem to be making a habit of sweeping me off

my feet,' she told him facetiously, trying to control the increasingly rapid flutter of her pulse as he carried her out to the car.

He said nothing, but laughed as he put her carefully into the passenger seat. She narrowed her eyes against the sun, and he nodded his head, as if he had just remembered something. 'Where are your sunglasses?' he asked.

'In my room, but I don't need them, Stefano, really.'

'I will not have you spoil your eyes,' he told her firmly. 'I will fetch them and you will put them on.'

'But ' she began, and he smiled down at her, a wicked glint challenging her objection.

'If you tell me exactly where to find them,' he said, 'I shall not spend too much time in your room.'

She felt childish and rather prissy for having even begun to raise an objection, and she did not look at him when she told him where to find them. 'They're only on the dressing table,' she said. 'You can't miss them.'

'I won't be gone very long, then, but it is necessary that you wear them when the sun is so strong.'

*Yes, sir!* she called after him as he ran back up

the step to the house, and he turned in the doorway and smiled.

'*Bimba!*' he retorted softly, and vanished in to the house.

He returned in a very few minutes with her sunglasses and made sure she put them on by perching them on her nose, before he went round and tucked himself behind the wheel and started the engine.

he breeze they made as they went along felt wonderfully cool and she leaned back in her seat, content to do nothing else but sit back and enjoy herself, her eyes behind the dark lenses drooping sleepily before they had gone very far.

They parked, as they had before, on the pull-in just off the quay, and Alison smiled anticipation when she looked across at the *Piccola* gleaming and bobbing in the bright sunlight. But she drew the line at being carried along the quay where anyone 'might see her, and shook her head firmly when he came round for her.

'I can walk *that* little way,' she told him.

'It is better you do not walk on your foot.'

'Then it is better I stay here in the car,' she told "him stubbornly, mocking his accent, a liberty he appeared not to resent.

He stood beside the car, looking down at her with an expression that was as much amused as exasperated. You *are* spoiled,' he declared, and Alison shrugged.

'So you said before, but I'm still not going to be carried along the quay.'

'Very well, *asinella!*' He opened the door of the car and stood back, making an exaggerated bow. 'I shall allow you to help yourself.'

'Thank you.' She swung her legs round and put her feet to the ground cautiously, wincing when her sore foot came in contact with the ground, then she stood for a moment, one foot turned on its side, before starting to hobble along the quay. It was much harder going, however, than it had been in

the house, with the furniture to hold on to, and after a step or two, she turned to him and put out a hand and arm in a gesture of appeal. 'Please,' she said, looking suitably contrite. 'If you could just lend me an arm, I can manage.'

He sighed deeply, but put an arm round her waist and almost lifted her off the ground. 'You are such a little donkey,' he said resignedly.

'*Ps that* what you called me just now?' He nodded, smiling down at her indignant expression. 'Thank you, that's very charming.' She tried to sound indignant, but found herself smiling instead, as he all but carried her along the quay as far as the boat's mooring.

He abandoned her for a moment while he dropped down in to the boat, then reached up to lift her down beside him, sitting her on the long leather-cushioned seat. 'Thank you,' she said meekly, and he laughed but said nothing.

He gave his attention to the boat, checking gauges, and dials, twiddling knobs and generally looking busy, while Alison watched, wondering if any of it was being done to impress her. Perhaps not, she thought after a moment or two, for he did not have the mentality that would see the need to impress her.

Apparently satisfied at last, he started up the powerful engine and ran it for a few seconds before casting off, heading the launch out to sea, the throbbing life of it pulsating under Alison's feet and right up her spine.

'I have been looking at some local maps,' Stefano said after a moment or two, calling back to her over

his shoulder. 'There is a place called Heron's Point, do you know it?'

Alison nodded. 'Yes, I do.' She realised her words were being whipped away by the wind when he turned and looked at her enquiringly, so she got to her feet and went to join him where he stood at the wheel.

'Sit down!' He pointed to a box-like contraption built into the side of the boat, and obediently she sat herself down on it. It was not as comfortable as the leather-upholstered seat, but at least it took the weight off her foot and she was within speaking distance of him.

'I used to know Heron's Point quite well,' she told him. 'Is that where we're going?'

He turned his head and smiled at her, rather enigmatically. 'Is that where you'd like to go?' he asked.

She looked at him uncertainly for a moment, surprised to have been consulted. 'I haven't seen it for years,' she said. 'A friend took me there several times, some years ago now.'

'Is there anything to see?'

She shrugged. It was a long time ago, or so it seemed, since she had last visited Heron's Point, but she could remember it quite well, as a place that had appealed to her. 'I haven't been there for quite a long time,' she said, 'but it used to be rather quiet and isolated, **if** you like that sort of thing. There's a nice beach, but if you wanted to land from the boat you'd have **to** go round to the north side, where the water's deeper.'

'But there is a mooring we could use?'

She nodded. Not a proper mooring, but there are rocks on the north side, and places where you can tie up.'

'And then climb over the rocks?'

She pulled a wry face, when she remembered that part of it. 'Yes, I'm afraid so, although it isn't very far, as I remember, before it levels off for a bit and then slopes down the other side, where the beach is.'

He was smiling, one brow lifted in query. 'You would like to go? Even though it means climbing over the rocks?'

She nodded. 'I could manage that much,' she told him, 'and I'd love to see Heron's Point again after all this time.'

Another smile came her way, a smile that gave her a sudden warm feeling of pleasure, although she told herself it was quite absurd to allow herself such emotions where Stefano was concerned. 'Then we shall go,' he said.

The long, sandy peninsula looked so exactly the same as the last time she had seen it that she could scarcely believe it. The sand here was much whiter than further along the coast and it glittered and shone like spilled sugar in the hot sun, while the grey rocks on the north side offered a means of access from deep water. It was quiet and deserted except for a colony of gulls who rose at their approach and screamed indignant defiance at the invasion.

'It looks exactly the same,' she said, half to herself, as Stefano took the boat round to the far side in search of a mooring.



It was not too difficult to find one, for on this side of the peninsula there was no beach, only the grim grey rock rising out of deep water and running for several yards across the width of the sandy strip before it gave way to sand and sloped down to the beach on the south side. It was the presence of a sheer, deep shelf of rock below the water that actually caused the difference in geography between the two sides of the peninsula, and mainly accounted for its desertion too, for unless one knew the lie of the land very well, bathing from that tempting looking beach could be dangerous.

Stefano, she thought, was not altogether happy about such a makeshift mooring, but he tied them up securely and then helped her ashore. He would have given more assistance, but she refused it. 'I can manage, thank you,' she told him. 'I have something to hold on to with the rocks.'

He smiled dryly, and put a hand under her arm anyway as they made their way over the rocks. 'I have never known a woman be so determinedly independent,' he told her, and Alison glanced at him under her lashes.

'Well, at least you've acknowledged the fact that I'm a woman,' she said. 'That's a step in the right direction.'

He laughed, and his fingers dug gently into her arm as he guided her. 'I have never denied that, *piccola*,'

'Huh!' She was struggling not only with her progress over the rocks but also with a rapid and breathing pounding under her ribs that dismayed her when she considered their position. 'You could have

fooled me,' she retorted. 'You're usually more inclined to act the heavy-handed guardian and make me feel about six inches high.'

'I am sure I do not!'

'Yes, you do !'

hastily turning her head away again. 'You know,' she added quickly, trying to restore normality, 'Danny would say I was stark raving mad to have even thought of coming here at all with this silly foot.'

Stefano laughed. 'And he would be right, of course.'

She glanced up to deny it, met his eyes again, and once more hastily lowered her own. 'Then that makes two of us ' she retorted breathlessly.

Oddly enough it seemed to be less difficult to use her one-sided gait on the uneven ground than it had been where it was more level, and the hand holding her arm undoubtedly helped, so that they were soon making their way down the fairly steep slope to the south side and the beach.

The long arm of the peninsula stretched out from the mainland for almost half a mile and there was not a soul in sight, apart from the two of them, a realisation that caused her a momentary qualm as they sat down on the hot sand. The nearest road was some miles away on the mainland, and it was unlikely that many other amateur sailors would be coming that way either, so that she felt they might just as well have been in the middle of the Sahara, or on some deserted island. It gave her a strong and discomfiting sense of intimacy which she tried hard to dismiss as she leaned back on her hands.

She loved the feel of the sun on her skin and also revelled in the soft, cool breeze that blew inshore, closing her eyes as she lifted her face to it. It was, she supposed after a moment or two, as good a time as any to attempt persuasion, to get the money she and Danny wanted so badly.

Stefano would surely feel mellow enough to be more approachable on the subject, in these surroundings. The only trouble was that she was reluctant to destroy her own peace and relaxation with anything as mundane as money matters.

She opened her eyes again and looked at Stefano from behind the camouflage of dark glasses, wondering just how amenable to reason he would be if she attempted it. He had no jacket and the usual white shirt was opened to the waist so that the sun he loved so much could turn his body even browner while he leaned back on his elbows, watching the sea ruffling the edge of the sand only a few feet from where they sat.

'Do you like it here?' she ventured at last, not quite knowing what direction she intended taking, and he turned his head and smiled at her, his own eyes hidden by dark glasses so that she could not read his expression.

'It is very quiet and isolated,' he said. 'I like it so.'

'No—I actually meant, do you like being here, in England,' Alison explained, and he nodded, turning again to look at the rolling water.

'That is why I stay, of course,' he told her. 'I have business here now, and I think I shall perhaps stay for some time, at least until ' He shrugged

then, and said no more, leaving her to puzzle over what he had said.

'Business here?' she asked, and he turned and looked at her again.

'Yes. Did you not know?'

She shook her head. 'No. No, I had no idea.'

He was smiling again, rather sardonically, she thought. 'Did you think that my stepfather was keeping me, Alison? Or had you not thought about it at all?'

'Not at all,' she confessed, and added a mite indignantly, 'I certainly hadn't thought my great-grandfather was—was keeping you. You had no call to say that.'

'I'm sorry.' He turned over on one elbow and reached out a hand to cover hers where it lay in the sand. 'When Mama married the old man I came with her to England because she had—doubts. You understand?'

'Perfectly,' Alison said.

'She was not a young woman, you understand,' he went on, 'but she was much younger than my *passo patrigno*, and to come to a strange country alone ' He spread expressive hands. 'I was her only son, so I came too, to care for her when she was—lonely. We got along very well, the old man and I, and he helped me to start in the same business that I have in Milano.'

Alison blinked, impressed, despite herself. 'You mean you have *two* businesses going?'

He nodded, smiling a little at her reaction. 'I have a very successful property business, *piccola*. Why should I give up so much when I have made it

work so well?'

'I—I'd no idea,' she said. 'You're—I suppose you're quite a wealthy man in your own right?'

'Fairly so,' he agreed, with another smile. 'Now I have the same kind of business here.'

'Oh, I see.' She looked at the shining, restless water for a few moments, all sorts of things going through her mind. Thinking that it seemed almost impossible to believe that while she had been living only a matter of five miles or so away, Stefano had been living at Creggan Bar for several years.

'If you had come to visit your great-grandpapa,' he told her, 'you would have met me before, and then who knows, *piccola*? You might even have liked me a little, huh?'

She ignored the last, rather provocative question. 'I only saw Great-Grandpa once,' she told him. 'He didn't like me, and my mother said he never wanted to see me again, especially after my father was killed. He never forgave me for not being a boy, you see.'

Stefano smiled up at her, resting on one elbow, his eyes still hidden, but she could guess their expression and felt again that uneasy, restless bumping sensation against her ribs. 'He was a fool to have regretted that,' he told her softly.

'He wanted a boy, you see,' she explained, talking just to cover how her mind was racing and the way her pulse hammered at her temple because he was touching her fingers. 'That's why he left you in charge of all the money—he wanted to make sure I didn't get too much at once and become a lady of leisure.'

It was almost accidental, the mention of the

money, and she almost regretted it even as she spoke, but he was smiling again. 'You like to be a lady of leisure?' he asked.

Alison shrugged, attempting to laugh off her sudden agitation. 'I'm enjoying it so far,' she admitted. 'Although I've no idea how long I can keep it up with your hand on the purse-strings.'

'You hate having my hand on the—purse-strings?' he suggested, and she shrugged again.

'It's not a very *flattering* state of affairs,' she told him. 'It makes me feel like—well, like a kept woman.'

He laughed then and shook his head slowly. 'And you would much rather be a *meccanica*, huh?'

This was her chance, Alison thought wildly. She would never have a better one, and he was as amenable as he would ever be, lazing here in the sun and talking to her much more frankly than he had ever done before. She felt that she knew him better now, after these few minutes, than she had in all the three months she had known him. She said nothing for a moment, however, then she sat upright, taking a handful of sand and letting it run through her fingers as she spoke.

'Will I ever have the chance to be a *meccanica*, Stefano?' she asked.

He was silent for so long that she began to think he was not intending to answer her at all, then he too sat upright and took off his sunglasses, his arms hugging his knees to him, not looking at her but down at his clasped hands.

'Is that what you really want, *piccola*?' he asked

softly, and she felt a sudden, strange sense of doubt in her heart when she thought of it.

She had never been in any doubt what she wanted until now. 'It—it's what Danny wants,' she told him, not committing herself for the moment.

'But it is *your* money.'

'Is it?'

He turned his head and looked at her and for a moment she tightened her fingers on another handful of trickling sand, as it slid between her fingers.

'You know it is, *cara mia*.'

'Then why won't you let me have enough to buy the garage for Danny?'

He said nothing for a moment or two, then looked at her again with eyes that were quite serious and, unbelievably, a little sad. 'Because it is for Danny and not for you,' he said quietly.

'But of course it is.' She tried hard to think of some way to make him see it as she saw it. 'Danny wants to own a garage, Stefano, and I think he'll make a go of it, given the chance. I don't think he'll ever manage it without my help, and it seems to me that I'm the one person who should help him most.'

'Because you are going to marry him?'

'Because I'm going to marry him.'

He held her gaze steadily and disconcertingly. 'You love him?' he asked, and she nodded.

'I'm going to marry him.'

He reached over and lifted her chin, trying to make her look at him again, but she found herself oddly reluctant to do so. 'That is the answer you gave me when I asked you the same question before,

*piccola*,' he told her softly. 'It is not really an answer.'

'I've—I've known Danny a long time.'

He shook his head, his hand still under her chin. 'That too is an evasion and not an answer,' he said. 'Why do you not answer me, *piccola*?'

Alison shook her head, using a hand to free herself of his hold, but he turned the hand she pulled away from her face, and curled the fingers over hers. For a long moment he looked at her, his black eyes glistening like coals, and she knew she made some soft, vague murmur of sound when he moved, and took her other hand in his, pulling her close to him.

'Stefano !'

She felt an unreasoning panic suddenly as he pushed her down into the shifting softness of the sand, his hands now on her shoulders, pushing down until it felt as if the ground was sinking under her and his mouth stilled even the small sound she made. She fought him briefly, and struggled for breath, then suddenly yielded to the urgency that emanated from him and slid her hands up round his black head, drawing him down closer until the throbbing beat of her heart pounded wildly in her head and her mind whirled chaotically.

Quite suddenly, it seemed, he released her, and she opened her eyes again to see the dark face still close, to her own, but wearing an expression she could not immediately interpret, and she gazed at him for a moment in silence, the sun warm and dry on her face. 'I—I suppose I should be angry,' she said then, her voice strangely husky and not sounding like hers at all.



The black eyes strayed slowly over her face, lingering on her mouth so that she thought he might kiss her again, and half smiled. 'You *should* be angry,' he said. 'I am trying to think why you are not.'

She laughed softly, looking at him from under her lashes, and most reluctant to move. 'Do you think I should be?'

This time his gaze stayed firmly with hers, and she thought there was a harder, less gentle look about it. 'If you are going to marry your Danny, most certainly you should be angry,' he said.

'Then I'm angry.'

He still rested on one elbow, only inches away. 'Or have you some ulterior motive for not being angry?' he asked softly, and laughed. 'Is it that you are so determined to have that money that you are even prepared

She hastened to deny whatever it was he had in mind before he voiced it, and she really was angry now that she realised what he thought of her. 'That's

*monstrous!*' she declared, sitting up so quickly that

her cheek brushed against his, making her shy away as if she had been stung.

'Do you deny that you have been \_\_\_\_\_' he shrugged expressively, 'nice to me, lately?' he asked.

She said nothing for a moment. It was most disconcerting having him analyse her intentions so accurately and she could have curled up there and then and sunk through that shifting sand with embarrassment. Instead she jerked up her chin after a moment or two and glared at him defiantly, her eyes bright and blue as jewels as she admitted it.

'No,' she said, 'I don't deny it ! I'

make you change your mind.' She saw him smile and only refrained from hitting him with difficulty. 'All's fair in love and war,' she told him. 'That's an old saying we have in this country.'

'And this is love?' he asked quietly, too quietly, she thought.

'Yes!'

He looked at her steadily for a moment, then smiled slowly. 'Then it is war, too, *piccola*,' he told her. 'Because I still do not believe you are asking for that money for the right reasons.'

She curled her hands into tight little fists and glared her frustration at him. 'I don't care what you believe,' she told him. 'You have no right to deprive me and Danny of that money just because you like playing—playing lord and master. That money is mine and we have a right to it.'

'Only if I say so.'

'Oh ! Oh, you unreasonable, stubborn\_' She got to her feet, clumsily and with a sudden gasp of pain because she had for the moment forgotten about her injured foot, and stood looking down at him. 'I'd like to go home,' she said haughtily. 'Right now.'

He made no move, but merely looked up at her and smiled. 'Not when you demand to go like that,' he told her with infuriating calm.

She was trembling and her hands were clenched tightly at her sides. It was difficult to believe that only a matter of minutes ago she had been in his arms and allowing, even wanting, him to kiss her. She glared down at him, still relaxed and easy on

the sandy beach. 'Will you *please* take me home?' she said.

'When we have been here such a short time?'

'Now!'

He sighed deeply, but looked quite undisturbed by her anger. 'I wish you would not show off,' he told her calmly. 'Come and sit down again.'

'I won't sit down, because I'm not staying,' she declared, and he shrugged and smiled.

'Then you will have a very long walk, *piccola*.'

She stared at him, unbelieving. 'You—you mean you *won't* take me home?'

'When I am ready, yes.'

'How very gallant ! ' she jeered.

The black eyes regarded her from beneath half-closed lids and she could have sworn that he was laughing at her, except that his expression was quite serious. 'I do not feel very gallant at the moment,' he told her. 'If you will sit down and be patient for a little while I will take you home and you can make a vow never to come out with me again.'

'I'll certainly do that ! ' she retorted, and he laughed.

'Poor Alison,' he said. 'How many times must I tell you, *piccola*, you cannot win?'

Reluctantly she sat down again on the sand, and after a moment or two she looked at him through her lashes and saw him smiling at her. 'I've only just realised,' she told him with every appearance of being serious about it, 'how much I hate you, Stefano Illari. I wish I'd never seen you or bothered about Great-Grandpa's money. Danny and I can manage

quite well without it and——' She stopped suddenly in mid-sentence and put a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide and shocked.

'Alison?' He looked at her anxiously, one hand reaching out for hers. 'What is wrong?'

'Danny,' she said in a flat voice of resignation. 'I forgot all about Danny coming to see me.'

## CHAPTER FIVE

'AN hour and a half,' Danny said, for what seemed to Alison like the thousandth time. 'I waited there a whole hour and a half for you to come back. I've never felt such a—a silly idiot in my life as I did with your aunt sitting there feeling sorry for me.'

Alison looked suitably contrite, or hoped she did, for if she was honest about it, she was beginning to get a little tired of hearing him complain about her absence. She had known Danny would be angry, as soon as Aunt Celia told her that she had found him home, and driven him up to Creggan Bar to see her, as she had promised, only to find Alison not only missing but, worse, in the company of Stefano Illari. But she had not expected him to be quite so complainingly garrulous on the subject.

Aunt Celia had said little about her 'own feelings in the matter, but Alison suspected that she was probably more annoyed than her manner betrayed, although whether on Danny's behalf or her own was difficult to guess. She had been willing enough to drive Alison down to the village, however, and had even offered to fetch her back again when she was ready.

'I'm sorry, Danny, I truly am sorry,' Alison told him, also for the thousandth time, it seemed. 'That's why I came down here to see you tonight, so that I could explain and apologise.'

She had even taken the unprecedented step of

calling at Danny's home to see him since she had not arranged to meet him that evening, and she was so sorry about forgetting him. His mother had been surprised, to say the least, to see her standing there on the doorstep, and her aunt just driving off, but she had invited her in, and Danny had received her in the sitting room, though not very graciously.

'You know how I dislike going up to Creggan Bar,' he said, yet again, and Alison sighed.

It was obvious, she thought ruefully, that he had not even listened to her apologies and explanations, but was intent on letting her know how humiliated he had been. 'I know you do,' she said patiently.

'You asked me to come and see you and then promptly cleared off somewhere with Illari, and forgot all about me,' he said. 'Very flattering, I must say.'

'Oh, Danny, I'm sorry ! ' She looked at him appealingly, in spite of the fact that she was rapidly losing patience with him and his non-stop complaints. 'I don't know what more I can say, except that I'm sorry.'

'But you can't blame me for being mad at you?'

She shook her head. 'No. No, I don't blame you at all.'

He looked at her for a moment in silence, as she sat there with her hands in her lap, perched right on the edge of a chair in his mother's seldom used front room. Then he left his own chair and came and crouched down beside her, one hand lifting her chin, trying to get her to look at him.

'I love you,' he said softly at last, and leaned over and kissed her mouth lightly.

'Danny ' She looked into his eyes at last, but only briefly before the memory of a very different kind of kiss made her hastily lower her gaze again.

He slid his hand under her hair and laid it gently against her face and neck, his fingers caressing, smiling at her. 'I was mad because you forgot me,' he told her, 'but mostly I think it was because you were with *him*. Why did you go with him, darling?'

'Because I was trying to do as you wanted me to, I suppose,' she said, and he looked at her curiously, the caressing fingers stilled for a moment.

'What *I* wanted you to do?' he asked. 'What do you mean?'

She shook her head slowly, wondering if she could explain just what had made her go with Stefano in the first place, apart from the boredom of staying indoors. It was difficult to know why she had simply gone off with him without giving Danny a second thought, without even considering Aunt Celia, if Stefano had not reminded her to leave a message for her. She supposed that somewhere in the back of her mind there must have been the notion of pleasing Stefano, so that he would be in a more yielding frame of mind and perhaps let them have the money they wanted. But if she was quite honest about it, she would have to admit that the money had not been her prime motive.

'It was you who suggested I should be—nice to Stefano,' she reminded him, feeling a little guilty to be off-loading the blame on to him, when he was apparently the injured party. 'I thought a trip in the boat might—mellow him a bit.'

'Oh, I see.' He looked more amiable about it now

that he knew her reason concerned him, and he looked at her shrewdly, his light blue eyes anxious that she should have been successful in her mission, so that his wasted journey would have been worthwhile after all. 'Did it work?' he asked. 'What did he say about it?'

She remembered only too well what Stefano had said about it, but she did not propose relaying it word for word. She also remembered what he had to say about her attempted subterfuge too, and she shook her head dolefully.

'He said quite a lot,' she told him. 'None of it very flattering, I'm afraid.'

'Oh!'

'What's more,' Alison went on, heaping on the agony, 'he guessed what I was trying to do. I gather I'm not very good at the *femme fatale* business.'

Danny stared at her in dismay. 'Oh no !'

'I'm afraid so.'

'But what on earth did he say?'

She shrugged uneasily, remembering the moment that had led up to Stefano's discomfiting guess. 'He just said that I must have some ulterior motive for not—I mean for being—well, pleasant to him.'

He flopped himself down in his own chair again, looking utterly miserable, his chin propped on one fist, his mouth drawn down at its corners disconsolately. 'Which means that he's going to be on his guard and twice as hard to get near in the future,' he bemoaned. 'Couldn't you have been a bit more subtle, darling?'

'I was trying to be subtle,' Alison told him defensively.



'Then how did he guess what you were up to?'

'I don't know how he guessed,' she said. 'Maybe I'm just not very good at deceiving people.'

He looked across at her. 'Will you keep trying?'

She might have known it, she thought ruefully. Danny would not give up easily when he really wanted a thing. 'I suppose so,' she said. 'Although I don't hold out much hope, now that he realises what I'm up to.' She remembered something else then and hastily avoided his eyes. 'There is something else,' she said, and he looked at her curiously. 'I—I seem to remember saying something about us managing without the money,' she confessed, and he stared at her unbelievably.

'You said *what?*' he asked.

'I—I told him I wished I'd never heard of Great-Grandpa's money, and that we could manage quite well without it.'

'Alison, are you raving mad?'

'Probably !' she retorted, wishing he could have been a bit more understanding about it.

'What on earth made you say that?'

'Oh—I don't know !' She looked down at her hands, held tightly together in her lap, the fingers taut and white-boned. 'I was angry with him,' she went on, when he did not speak and she found the silence unbearable. 'I was so angry I felt like—like

'Throwing away our chances,' he observed tartly, and Alison suddenly felt like crying. She felt suddenly as if she was trapped between the two of them, Danny and Stefano, and each just as stubborn as the other in his own way, One determined to get

the garage he had set his heart on, and the other just as determined to withhold the means of getting it, while she was tossed between the two of them like a shuttlecock.

'I *do* wish I'd never inherited the wretched money,' she declared, a suspicious brightness in her eyes. 'Or else that Great-Grandpa had really left it to *me*, instead of making me crawl to Stefano for every penny I need. It isn't fair—I *hate* having to ask him, and most of all I hate having to be two-faced about the way I behave towards him. I'm no good at being a—a cheat just because you need—we need enough for your precious garage. I hate doing it!' A tear rolled down her face dismally, and she was beginning to feel thoroughly sorry for herself. 'Nobody bothers how I feel, caught between the two of you and getting the kicks from both sides. I wish I'd never *heard* of the wretched money '

Danny was beside her again before she had finished speaking, his hands soothing her, holding her in his arms. 'Poor darling!' He kissed her mouth with more enthusiasm than finesse and smiled at her tearful face. 'Don't cry, my darling Alison, please don't cry, my darling.'

'I—I can't help it,' she said jerkily. 'I'm fed up!'

'Darling!' He kissed her again, pulling her close so that her head was on his shoulder, her tearful face pressed against his neck. 'Forget about it if it's going to upset you this much. It isn't worth it.'

'Yes, it is,' she argued tearfully.

'No, it isn't. I hate to see you crying about it.'

She muffled another couple of sobs against his collar. 'I'll *have* to keep asking him,' she insisted,

'however much I hate it, because it's our future he's spoiling, and I won't let him upset our plans.'

He managed, somehow, to turn his head and plant a kiss on her chin, and there was a wry smile on his face as he held her close. 'Darling, I thought I was a villain too!

'So you are.' She lifted her head for a second or two and looked at him, then smiled and kissed him lightly on his cheek. 'No, I suppose you're not,' she sighed.

'You forgive me for being boorish about your going with him?'

She nodded, as well as she was able with her head on his shoulder. 'I can't blame you,' she told him. 'It was my own fault.'

He kissed her again and laughed softly against her ear. 'Feeling better now?' he asked.

She looked up at him, long lashes half concealing her eyes. 'Yes, thank you, and I'm sorry.'

He smiled and kissed her wet cheeks, more gentle and quiet than she had ever known him to be. 'There's no need to be sorry at all,' he said. 'I have been a bit of a brute, setting you on to seduce Stefano Illari, just for my own selfish ends.'

'Oh, nonsense, it was as much for my sake as yours.' She could not resist a smile at the idea of her seducing Stefano, however, or even attempting to. 'As for Stefano,' she told him, 'it certainly wouldn't be much use my trying to seduce him, as you call it. For one thing I don't believe he's-seduceable, and even if he was, I doubt very much if I'm the one who could do it.'

When she remembered the emotional after-effects the trip with Stefano had had on both herself and Danny it was something of a jolt to discover that Stefano himself was behaving exactly as he had always done towards her. Not, she told herself wryly, that it should have surprised her so much, for he was not easily disturbed by anything.

For the next couple of days she was very good about resting her foot as much as possible, so that by the third day she was relieved to find that she could walk on it almost normally, and made up her mind to make up for lost time by going out as much as possible.

She had come down to breakfast and found both Stefano and her aunt already seated at the table and in fact almost finished their meal. They both looked up when she came in and her aunt smiled apologetically.

'I hope you didn't mind us not waiting for you, darling,' she said. 'Tut we didn't know just how long you were going to be and it was getting a bit late, so we started without you.'

The familiar 'we', Alison felt, had a close and intimate sound to it, that somehow seemed to exclude her, and she found herself wondering, yet again, just what her aunt's relationship was with Stefano. Probably closer than she had imagined, if that brief, almost imperceptible smile she had exchanged with him was anything to go by.

The fact that he had kissed *her* in the way he had meant little, she supposed. He was in all probability a man who kissed a pretty woman whenever and wherever the opportunity arose, and then

thought no more about it.

'I suppose I am a bit later than usual,' she admitted, and nodded briefly to acknowledge Stefano's greeting. 'I overslept a bit, but there was no hurry, so I didn't bother too much.'

'You haven't any plans for today?' Aunt Celia asked, and Alison thought there was something more than mere curiosity behind the question. Stefano too, she thought, was interested in her answer, judging by the way he was watching her.

She shrugged. 'Nothing special,' she said.

'You're not seeing Danny?'

She shook her head. 'No. Danny's going over to Leethorpe about another job, so I shan't be seeing him until tonight.' She looked across at her aunt curiously, wondering just what *was* behind the questions, for she was sure now that something was. 'Have you anything in mind?' she asked.

Aunt Celia glanced at Stefano again as she spoke. 'No, I haven't,' she said. 'But Stefano was wondering if you felt like starting your driving lessons this morning. Now that your foot seems so much better.'

So that was it, Alison thought, but looked at him curiously, wondering why he had bothered to inveigle Aunt Celia into asking her about it rather than mention it himself, which would have been more characteristic. Such reticence was quite unlike him, and she met the black eyes as they watched her steadily down the length of the table.

'I don't know that I want driving lessons,' she said quietly. 'I like being driven, as I told Stefano when he mentioned it before, and I don't own a car, so there isn't really much point, is there?'

'But it's always useful to know how to drive, dear,' Aunt Celia told her, gently insistent, while Stefano stayed silent but watched her still, only his eyes betraying an interest in her answer.

'suppose it is,' Alison allowed, not at all happy about the idea. 'But—well, couldn't *you* teach me, Aunt Celia?'

Her aunt shook her head, glancing again at Stefano. As if seeking his approval, Alison thought crossly. 'I don't think so, darling,' she said. 'I'm not a bad driver, but I'm nothing like as good as Stefano is, and I'm sure I'd make a terrible instructor. I'm much too nervous and I haven't much patience, I'm afraid.'

'And you think Stefano has?' she asked, but before her aunt could reply she looked at Stefano again.. 'You're keeping very quiet about it,' she remarked bluntly, and **he** pulled a face at her over his coffee cup.

**I** thought it best,' he confessed. '**I** thought you might perhaps listen to Celia more readily than to me.'

'Oh, I see.' She was surprised to find herself having to resist a smile at the sheer cunning of it. 'That was very crafty of you.'

'I thought so.' He smiled, putting down his cup and looking at her steadily. 'You will come?' he asked quietly, as if he thought he knew her answer quite well, and she shrugged.

'I don't know.'

'But why do you hesitate?' he asked, his eyes glittering at her like a challenge. 'Do you not trust me, *piccola?*'

Alison glanced hastily at Aunt Celia, wondering how on earth *she* was taking his very obvious and deliberate methods of persuasion. 'It isn't a case of trusting *you*,' she told him, with far more bravado than she was feeling. 'I'm not sure I should be trusted on the road with anything on wheels. I can't even ride a bike without falling off.'

'Oh, but you could try, darling,' Aunt Celia insisted, rather surprisingly, Alison thought. She seemed not to mind at all, sending them off together.

'I wish you would try, *piccola mia*,' Stefano told her softly, and she sighed resignation.

'Since it seems to be the general opinion that I should learn to drive,' she said. 'I suppose I'd *better* learn to drive.'

He bobbed his head in a mocking bow. 'You are *too* gracious.'

Quick to detect sarcasm, Alison stuck out her chin, her blue eyes ominous with warning. 'Just don't bait me the whole time we're out, Stefano,' she threatened, 'or I might just run you straight into a ditch.'

His face expressed mock fear and he raised one hand shoulder-high, but his eyes still glittered with laughter and she did not really hold out much hope of getting things all her own way for the rest of the morning. 'I promise,' he vowed. 'I promise most solemnly.'

It was a little over an hour later that they were driving along the narrow, quiet coast road out of Leethorpe, and Alison was still puzzled as to why Aunt Celia should have declined to come with them. Since she had nothing very special to do, on her

own admission, Alison had expected her to take advantage of the invitation and come with them, but she said she preferred not to, and Stefano at least had not pressed the point.

The sun was bright, but not too hot, and a breeze blowing in off the water made it delightfully cool and fresh. It was so much nicer, Alison thought, to be driven than to drive. For one thing she could lean back and close her eyes, enjoying the breeze and the sun warming her face. But her enjoyment was short-lived, for once they were through the town and out into the open country Stefano stopped the car and insisted that they change places. Very reluctant to do so, she tried delaying tactics, but he simply got out of the driving seat and got in on her side, forcibly moving her over on to the other.

There were so many pedals and buttons and levers, she thought at first glance, that she would never be able to remember what they were all for, but in a surprisingly short time she found herself actually taking the big car, albeit rather jerkily, along the road. Her eyes were almost starting out of her head because she expected that at any minute it would run away with her.

*\* Alison's Italian arrived her deep sighs. To not*

be so tense, *piccola*. There is no one about, and even if there was you have no need to panic.'

'I'm not panicking,' Alison informed him shortly. 'I'm just petrified!'

'There is no need to be.'

'It could run away with me,' she warned, as the car hiccupped rather alarmingly, and shot forward of its own volition.



'If it does, we can soon get it back under control,' he consoled her. 'Now please keep your eyes on the road, *piccola*, and do not grip the steering wheel as if it was a a

'Weapon?' she suggested acidly. 'I wish it was. I'd clobber you over the head with it for even suggesting that I could learn to drive '

His laughter did nothing to help, but she made the effort to ease her grip on the steering wheel, although she still did not trust the car enough to allow it too much rein, and they staggered along the narrow road for some distance without incident. Alison was keeping a wary eye on the speedometer, although it read no more than five miles an hour, so it was unlikely to be cause for concern.

A small brown rabbit running suddenly into the road caused the trouble, and made her stamp hastily on the footbrake rather than run over it. The problem with having a choice of pedals, however, was that in an emergency it was so easy to choose the wrong one and, without realising it, she stamped on the accelerator instead of the footbrake.

The big car shot forward at an alarming rate, and she let out a cry both for the fate of the rabbit and herself. She covered her face with her hands and felt the car careering across rough ground, although she dared not look just where they were heading.

In a blind panic, she felt Stefano move beside her, and his hands reached across for the wheel. The engine stopped as if it had been switched off suddenly, and she heard him apply what she thought was the handbrake. Still shaking like a leaf, she only took her hands down from her face when they stop-

ped rather suddenly.

The road was now several yards away to the right, and they were stopped on the wide expanse of springy green turf, only feet away from a large rock boulder. The silence was almost tangible, and then a lark somewhere decided to cheer them with a song, soaring up into the bright blue sky, while Alison dazedly followed his progress.

She did not dare to look at Stefano yet, but stared up at that annoyingly cheerful lark overhead. 'Are you all right?' his voice asked, after a moment or two, and close to her ear, and she nodded.

He was, she realised dazedly, more in the driving seat than the passenger seat and practically in her lap, one arm curved round behind her, the other lying across her knees. When she brought herself back to earth and drew her eyes away from the flight of the lark, she found his face only inches from her own, and the black eyes regarding her with a mixture of anger and resignation.

'I'm sorry,' she told him, small-voiced.

He sighed, and removed the arm that lay across her knees, but otherwise stayed exactly where he was. 'You prefer to kill yourself and me rather than a rabbit?' he asked, remarkably calmly in the circumstances, she admitted, and she bit her lip, looking down at her hands and wishing he was not in such close proximity. He was disconcerting enough at the best of times, without sitting practically in her lap.

'It was instinctive.'

'I see.' He studied her again for a while, then sighed deeply. 'The famous British love of animals,

I suppose ! '

'Well, it's not a vice,' she objected defensively, and he laughed shortly.

'That is typical '

His accent, she could not help noticing, was much stronger than she had ever heard it before and there was a deep glow of exasperation in his eyes.

'You don't have to be so sarcastic,' she told him haughtily, and he lifted his hands and shoulders high, in a gesture of resignation, raising his eyes to heaven in appeal.

*'Mamma mia !'*

What followed was a long and, she felt sure, very unflattering opinion of her in liquid Italian, but somehow it sounded beautiful, even if he was swearing at her, and when he had finished he put a hand to his face and hid behind it for a moment or two. Then he looked at her again, and smiled ruefully.

'I should apologise,' he told her, but she stuck out her chin and dismissed the idea with raised brows.

'Oh, don't bother,' she told him. 'I don't speak Italian, so I don't know what it all meant, although I can guess.'

'You can guess,' he agreed with a wry smile, and sighed deeply. 'Ah well,' he said, 'you promised to run me into a ditch, so I should be grateful that there was no ditch near enough, or we should be unable to go on.'

Alison stared at him in dismay. 'You mean you still want me to go on?' she asked, finding it hard to believe that he was ready to take any more chances with her.

'Of course.'

'But——' She shook her head, wondering if she had even the courage left to start up the engine again. 'I—I don't think I can, Stefano.'

'Of course you can!' He leaned across and switched on the engine, then brought it purring to life, while Alison sat there almost literally shivering in her shoes at the prospect of having control of the mobile monster again. 'Now—do you remember the procedure?'

'No—no, I don't think so.'

He sighed. 'One foot on the accelerator, one on the clutch. No, no, no! This one! Now—depress the clutch, engage the gear ' The same instructions were repeated in her ear with relentless insistence, and she followed blindly as he told her, until they were once more on the road.

Cautiously she guided the car along, now more than ever aware that the sea was only about twenty yards to their right and some forty feet down from the cliff. If she had managed to send the car careering off to one side of the road, she was equally likely to send it the other way, towards the cliff edge and the sea, and the prospect made her more nervous than ever.

'I—I wish we could go somewhere else and—and learn,' she told him, keeping her eyes firmly fixed ahead.

'Why? This is a very quiet road, and it is unlikely that we shall see any other traffic.'

'The sea happens to be no more than—than twenty yards away,' she told him. 'And there's a big drop down to it from the cliff. If I happen to go

berserk again——

'You won't,' he assured her confidently.

'But the Dunway bus comes along here,' she informed him, and he laughed.

'But surely even you, little genius, cannot fail to *see a* bus when it approaches along an open road,' he said. 'You will have plenty of time to pull in to the side of the road, if you have not the courage to pass it.'

'*I won't* have,' she assured him.

They had gone about another fifty yards or so, and she thought she might be beginning to get the hang of it at last, when one of the front wheels ran over a fairly large stone in the road and the resultant tip put her completely off balance. Her hands gripped the wheel in alarm and she fought with it for several moments, as if it was a live thing, then Stefano leaned across and took the wheel from her, steering them on to the grass again.

'Ease your foot off the accelerator,' he told her quietly, and she obeyed without hesitation, while the car rolled to a standstill and he applied the handbrake.

'I wish you'd let me give up,' she told him, her head resting on her forearms on the steering wheel. 'I'll be a nervous wreck by the time you've finished with me, Stefano.'

'It is not me that is doing it,' he objected, albeit mildly. 'You are the one who makes the mistakes.'

'Well, *I told* you I couldn't do it, and you wouldn't listen.'

He shook his head, turning in his seat to look at her. 'You can do it,' he insisted. 'But you panic in-

stead of using your head.'

'So I'm a panic-stricken idiot ! ' she exclaimed in exasperation. 'I can't help it, and I wish you'd let me give up, instead of bullying me.'

'I am not bullying you I '

She looked at the dark face so close to her own, and hastily lowered her eyes when he smiled at her. 'I'll never be any good at it,' she said appealingly. 'Please take no for an answer, Stefano. Please !'

'I do not like to take no for an answer from a beautiful girl,' he said softly, and to her dismay she felt the colour rush warmly in to her cheeks.

'Well, this time you're going to have to,' she told him, wishing her voice sounded as firm and self-controlled as she wanted it to, instead of shakingly husky.

He sat and looked at her for several seconds in silence, his eyes dark and impenetrable, a small, slow smile tipping his mouth crookedly at one corner, then he shook his head. 'You *are*—*codarda, bella mia*,' he told her. 'Do you know that?'

'Am I?'

'You know what it means?' he asked, and she shrugged.

'I can guess,' she said ruefully. 'But I don't care if you do think I'm cowardly, Stefano, I don't want to drive any more.'

She looked at him with huge appealing eyes, uncertain just why she was feeling the way she was, and quite sure she must be doing the wrong thing. His gaze swept over her face slowly until it came to rest on her mouth and lingered there with an intensity that set her pulses racing wildly out of control.

Then he laughed softly and leaned across to kiss her mouth.

*ambina!"* he said softly against her lips and, despite the chaotic state of her senses, Alison thought *she heard the sound of the Dunway bus chugging* along the coast road behind them. But it was too late now, to worry about whether they had been seen or not and, at the moment, it seemed not to matter.

## CHAPTER SIX

DANNY was waiting in his customary place on the sea wall when Alison went to meet him that evening, but she could tell by his stance, long before she got near him, that something was wrong, and guessed that the interview that morning had not gone well for him. She sighed, partly in sympathy with herself, in case he should be in a difficult mood after his disappointment.

His shoulders drooped despondently, and he looked as if he was at odds with the whole world as he kicked with one foot at the base of the bollard he lolled against. His hands were in his pockets and his head bowed, and he did not even look up, even when he must have heard her approaching.

He raised his head only when she spoke to him, and it was when he looked at her that she saw the expression in his eyes. Instinctively she put out a hand to touch his arm, and looked at him with anxious eyes. 'Danny!' she said. 'What's happened?'

He said nothing for a moment, and he did not even kiss her, so that she resigned herself to a gloom-filled evening and looked at him with her eyes darkly blue and unhappy. Then he heaved himself away from the bollard at last, and started walking, but made no move to put an arm around her, as he usually did, nor even looked as if he cared whether she was there or not.

'Danny 1 '



She went after him, although her first instinct was to leave him to brood on whatever it was, on his own. He could at least have stopped and explained his reasons, she thought. He walked on along the sea wall as far as a rather tumbledown concrete shelter, and there he ducked inside so suddenly that she almost lost him, turning to face her as she followed him in.

'Danny, what on earth's the matter?' she asked, a little breathlessly from trying to keep pace with him.

He looked at her steadily for a moment longer, his light blue eyes cold and curious. 'I saw you,' he said at last, and in tones of such heavy drama that she would probably have laughed if she had not known he was so deadly serious.

'You—saw me?'

He still looked at her, as if he expected his accusing gaze to make her uneasy enough to lower her own eyes, but she refused to do that, at least until she knew what she was supposed to have done wrong. It was obvious by now that whatever was wrong he was holding her the cause of it.

'Danny,' she said slowly, 'I don't know what you're talking about, and you're not being very fair up to now. I wish you'd let me into the secret of what I'm supposed to have done.'

He slumped down on to the slatted wooden seat in the shelter, his hands still in his pockets and looking thoroughly disgruntled. 'I told you I was going to Leethorpe this morning,' he reminded her, and she nodded.

'Yes, that's right, you did.'

'Well, if you're interested——

'Of course I am,' she interrupted hastily.

'They hadn't anything for me,' he went on, 'but they knew of someone in Dunway who wanted a booking clerk.'

'You went for it?' She still could not see what the connection was between that and anything she could possibly have done to offend him, but she waited.

'No, I didn't.'

'I'm sorry. But I don't see——

He looked at her narrow-eyed. 'No, you didn't see,' he interrupted shortly. 'That was the whole point.'

She waited, but he was looking at her now as if he expected her to know what he meant by that very enigmatic remark. 'Danny, will you please explain?' she begged, and he glanced at her grudgingly before looking down again.

'I don't suppose you expected me to be travelling on a bus along that particular road, did you?'

'On a bus ' she began, and then suddenly saw it all clearly. Too dearly, as she remembered sitting that morning in the car with Stefano, along beside the Dunway road, pleading to be let off her driving lessons. She remembered, too, that just as Stefano kissed her, she had vaguely registered the sound of the Dunway bus chugging along on the road, only yards away from where they sat.

'Yes,' he said, nodding his head when he saw realisation dawn in her eyes. 'I saw you with Illari in his car.'

'Oh, I see ! ' She smiled wryly. 'Is that what's bothering you?'

'Bothering me?' He looked at her, his eyes angrily unhappy. 'Of course it's bothering me. Why wouldn't it?'

'Because it's so easily explained,' she told him, still hoping that he might not have seen anything more condemning than the two of them sitting in the car. 'Stefano's teaching me to drive.'

Danny curled his lower lip, his eyes scornful. 'It wasn't driving he was teaching you, when I saw you,' he told her. 'Not by a long way 1 '

'Danny 1 ' She tried to look righteously indignant, but it wasn't easy when she felt so guilty about it, and she could cheerfully have murdered Stefano at that moment for putting her in this position.

'He was kissing you 1 As plain as day and in broad daylight he was *kissing* you,' Danny went on relentlessly, 'so don't try to deny it.'

'I'm not trying to deny it,' Alison told him shortly, and Danny stared at her, disconcerted for the moment by her admitting it.

'You mean—you mean you admit it?' he said, and she shrugged, sitting down beside him on the slatted seat.

'There's not much use my denying anything, if you saw it, is there?' she said, and took a moment to swallow on her temper that was being sorely tried. 'All right, Danny, so Stefano was kissing me; but if you'd seen us a bit more closely and for a bit longer, you'd have seen that it was a mere—friendly peck and lasted just about two seconds, if that.'

Perhaps friendly peck was stretching the truth a bit, she would have been the first to admit, but only

because Stefano was incapable of producing anything so commonplace, but she refused to have one kiss turned into a full-scale orgy by Danny's fertile imagination.

He did not look at her, but kicked at the rough concrete floor of the shelter, his head still bowed. 'I didn't have time to see much,' he admitted. 'But he *was* kissing you, and it isn't a necessary part of learning to drive that I know of.'

'No, of course it isn't,' she agreed, already seeing the first signs of capitulation. 'If you want the full truth of it, I was begging to be let off any more lessons. I'm just not cut out for driving cars, especially that great brute of Stefano's.'

Danny looked up, cocking a brow at her. 'And where did the kiss come into it?' he asked.

She looked at him from under her lashes, and smiled. 'I'm afraid I'm not above using any tactics to get out of anything I particularly don't like,' she confessed, although it was a little short of the truth. 'I had been playing up to him rather to get him to drop the idea of the lessons.'

'Don't you want to learn to drive?'

She pulled a face. 'Not if my teacher is Stefano,' she told him. 'He's a bully!'

'I see.'

'And he wasn't easy to persuade,' she went on. 'That was a sort of—of capitulation kiss, if you like.'

'On his part?'

'Of course on his part.'

'I see.'

'Are you sure you do?' she asked, with a wry

smile. 'You don't *sound* very sure.'

'Oh, I believe you,' he said, and reached out with one hand to draw her closer to him.

'You're not angry any more?'

He smiled wryly. 'I believe you mostly because I want to,' he admitted.

He looked at her for several seconds speculatively, and she laughed. 'What are you looking at me like that for?' she asked.

'I was just thinking,' he said, his fingers ruffling her hair. 'If you're so good at coaxing your friend | lari, you'd better try some of the same tactics when you're next after that money for us.'

She frowned over that, and shook her head, not liking the implication at all. 'You wouldn't mind what I did?' she asked, and he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

'Of course I would,' he told her. 'But whatever you did this morning, it might just work again.'

She snuggled up close to him, glad to be back to normal. 'I don't think it would,' she said. 'And I don't think I'd better do anything too obvious.'

He smiled down at her, kissing the end of her nose. 'Why not?' he asked. 'Wouldn't your auntie like it?'

For a moment Alison wondered if it was possible that he too had noticed anything, then realised that he had never seen Aunt Celia and Stefano together, so he couldn't possibly know anything. 'I don't think she *would* like it,' she agreed, and must have put rather more meaning into her answer than she had intended, for he looked at her speculatively.

'Don't tell me,' he said, 'that Aunt Celia's *fallen*

for him! '

'I wouldn't say fallen for him exactly,' Alison demurred, unwilling to be too open about her suspicions, but Danny was nodding wisely and smiling in a way she did not like at all.

As if to confirm her suspicions, Stefano and Aunt Celia went off together the following day, and Alison watched them go with mixed feelings. She had asked, quite casually, what plans her aunt had for the afternoon, and Aunt Celia had looked across at Stefano before answering. It was a gesture that annoyed Alison intensely, because it gave her the impression that her aunt was seeking his permission to tell her.

She had to go in to Skarren to see her dentist. Aunt Celia explained and, since Stefano also had business in Skarren, they thought it convenient to go in together in Stefano's car. 'It isn't long since you went to the dentist before,' Alison said. 'Are you having trouble with your teeth, Aunt Celia?'

Her aunt shook her head hastily and smiled, again flicking a glance at Stefano. 'Oh no, not really, darling, but I—well, I need more check-ups now.' She laughed. 'Old age creeping on, you know.'

Alison saw her glance at Stefano, and frowned. 'Hardly that,' she told her. 'But I forget you're one of those rare people who don't *mind* going to the dentist, aren't you?'

'I don't mind in the least,' her aunt agreed, and Alison thought she detected a small, sardonic smile on Stefano's dark face.

She shrugged, still unsure whether the dentist was

merely an excuse to go with Stefano, although why either of them should have thought it mattered to her one way or the other, she could not understand. 'Rather you than me,' was all she said.

'What are you going to do, dear?' Aunt Celia asked, and Alison shrugged again.

'Oh, I don't know, I hadn't thought about it. Go for a walk probably, I feel like walking.'

'Well, we shan't be very long, darling,' her aunt told her as she followed Stefano out to the car. 'Then maybe we can go through those paint pamphlets, hmm? It'll be lovely to see the old house with a new coat of paint, won't it?'

Alison nodded absently, watching from the step while Stefano helped her aunt politely into the car and smiled down at her as he slammed the door shut. He was the very essence of the perfect escort, Alison thought wryly, thoughtful and polite and quite charming when it suited him, and she nibbled thoughtfully at her thumb as she watched them go. Aunt Celia was very definitely impressed, it was easy to see, but Alison simply could not, no matter how she tried, visualise Stefano as her uncle.

Left to herself she decided that the idea of a walk was a good one, for it was much too nice to stay indoors, and she would go down to the village and decide where to from there. It would help to clear the cobwebs from her mind and also give her some much-needed exercise. Driving lessons and boat trips were all very well, but they were no substitute for walking when it came to exercise.

It was warm and sunny and as she walked down the hill to the village, the turf underfoot smelled

rich and loamy and the sea, rolling in lazily below the rock-faced cliffs, caught the sun and glinted like thousands of tiny mirrors that dazzled her eyes. There were gulls, drifting broad-winged on the warm currents of air below the higher cliffs, wheeling and turning, their cries carried to her on the light inshore wind that lifted her hair and cooled her forehead. It was the kind of scene that she had known and loved all her life and she never grew tired of it.

She knew she would not be seeing Danny, for he had gone to look at yet another garage for sale, this one further afield still, and she smiled ruefully when she considered how remote their chances were of ever buying it. Stefano showed no sign of relenting in that direction and she thought he never would. If only Danny had not so firmly set his heart on owning a garage, things would have been so much easier all round.

She sighed as she came down the last few feet into the village, and shook off the problem of Danny and Stefano, determined they should not spoil her enjoyment of her walk. The village itself was very small, and was soon left behind as she started out along the coast road, heading towards Creggan Creek, although consciously she had no particular destination in mind.

She turned inland after a while, striking off along a path that ran across a field, giving a wide berth to the more permanent occupants who eyed her with bovine suspicion, but mercifully took no closer interest.

She was aware that the path would bring her out



on to the road not very far from the house she had visited with Stefano, but she was half way across the path before she realised with a start that the old house had been at the back of her mind ever since she set out.

Shrugging off the realisation, she climbed over an ancient stile into the lane, glad to have the shade of the trees after her walk in the sun. It was hotter than was comfortable away from the cooling breeze nearer the water, and she stood for a few moments, leaning against the stile and enjoying the shade.

The house was almost opposite where she stood, on the other side of the road, shrouded by tall trees and set in its own, now neglected, garden. It must once have been quite a lovely old place, she thought, and the knowledge that Stefano was interested in it drew her across the road.

There was no one else about that she could see, not even a passing car, and only a small brown dog eyed her curiously when she went in through the rotting wooden gates and along the gravel drive. The windows had that blank, closed look of a house without life, and she peered into one of them, seeing little more than her own face because of the sheen of dust inside that reflected the sun.

Walking round to the side of the house, she discovered roses growing in profusion on a tumble-down trellis, and she broke off one of them and held it to her nose. It was an old-fashioned dark red rose, and somehow the sweet headiness of its perfume made her feel sad suddenly, as if it was a reminder of happier times.

At the back of the house it was mostly lawn, or

what had once been lawn but was now not much better than rough grassland, sloping down to the creek and the rickety wooden pier where she and Stefano had come ashore. It had a still, breathless air about it that seemed to belong to summer, and she could not easily imagine it in the wild east gales that blew up the creek in winter.

Stefano had thought it had possibilities, she remembered, and at the time she had not been very impressed, but now, closer to the house and absorbing something of its atmosphere, she could better understand what he meant. The view of the creek and the sandy bay on the other side of it had, in the bright sunshine, a slightly Mediterranean look, and she remembered, too, Stefano's comment that it reminded him of home.

His interest in it, which had so puzzled her at the time, was of course explained by his business interests in property development, and she smiled to herself when she thought of how ignorant she had been of even the most basic knowledge about him.

She had never really thought of him as having an existence until she had come into actual contact with him, although she knew of her great-grandfather's remarriage, of course, and that he had a stepson. She had not, she thought, even known what his name was until she heard it at the reading of the will.

The windows on the side of the house facing the creek were much easier to see through, being in shadow, and Alison peered through curiously into the big, dusty rooms, feeling once again that strange air of sadness when she thought of it having been

someone's home, and now looking so old and neglected.

It was as she pressed her face to one of the windows that she felt it give slightly, and stepped back, frowning. She hesitated briefly, then poked an exploratory finger between the window and the frame. As she half expected, it pulled open as far as the first hole on the arm, quite enough for her to reach in and open it further if she wanted to, and she stood there for a moment or two, undecided whether she should or not.

Eventually she succumbed to curiosity and reached in, lifting the arm off the peg and opening the window wide. Then she scrambled in over the sill and landed with a dull, echoing thud on the board floor, brushing dust from her clothes as she looked around her.

It had high ceilings, and the rooms had a spacious and sunny look, even with their coating of dust, so that she could more than ever see Stefano's point about it having possibilities, and she wondered what plans he had in mind for it.

She ventured upstairs, lured there by the sun shining in through a window at the top of the wide, curving staircase, and she was in one of the bedrooms at the front of the house, when she heard the unmistakable sound of a car door slamming, followed closely by another, and then the crunching of footsteps on the gravel drive.

She dared not even look out of the window to make sure that they were coming there, but she had no real need to, for there was little doubt they must have been, and none at all in her own mind. Instead

she looked around desperately for somewhere to hide herself.

Not that it would do a great deal of good, she realised as she looked around at a big built-in wardrobe in one corner, they would be bound to look in all the cupboards if they were looking over the house with a view to buying it. But the thought of being caught on premises where she had absolutely no right to be, and with that open window betraying her means of entry, was too much to face, so hiding herself was the only alternative.

She was in a state of near panic when she heard voices and footsteps downstairs in the hall, and dived straight for the big wardrobe, the rose she had been carrying with such care dropping to the floor in her haste to close the doors behind her.

She had more than enough room to move, but she crouched in one corner, feeling a bit like a cornered mouse, holding her breath and with her heart in her mouth as she waited while the callers explored the lower floor. She could hear nothing while they were downstairs and very little as they came upstairs, but it seemed like only minutes before she heard them come into the room where she was, the old boards echoing to their tread.

She drew in a involuntary breath suddenly when she heard the man's voice, seemingly right up close to the wardrobe door, but it was not only his nearness that startled her. Even muffled by the intervening door she had no difficulty in recognising Stefano's deep, slightly accented voice, and she put both hands to her mouth and held her breath.

She expected him to open the door at any second,

even hoped he would, for the anticipation was becoming unbearable, but the expected revelation did not happen. She knew that he was still right up close to the door and the handle was shaken once or twice, but it did not open, and she wondered why. Instead she heard him laugh, and it was easy to imagine the accompanying shrug of his shoulders.

'It seems to be stuck,' he said, and moved away again, across the echoing boards. She vaguely heard the tail end of a sentence that sounded like, '—have to pick up my passenger again,' and he was gone.

The woman's voice had not been familiar, but it had sounded, as near as she could judge, like someone fairly young and rather bored, but even so Alison could not understand why she had not been more insistent about the wardrobe door being tried again. For that small mercy, however, she thanked heaven and, crouched there in the corner of the big wardrobe, sought for a reason why Stefano had not opened the-door and betrayed her.

She could hear nothing, once they had left the room, but she thought she detected something that could have been footsteps going downstairs and, a little while later, the vibration of the front door slamming. For a while she stayed where she was, even though she was almost certain they had gone, then she ran her fingers over the inside surface of the door searching for the catch, and discovered something that she should have noticed in the first place.

There *was* no catch on the inside of the doors, and no way of opening them from the inside at all. She was imprisoned inside the wardrobe quite

securely, and with heaven knew how little hope of being freed.

It seemed to Alison that hours had passed since Stefano and the woman had left, and she had achieved precisely nothing in the way of freeing herself. The house was old and the cupboard strongly built, and banging and pushing on the lock in the hope of breaking it had resulted only in bruised hands. The doors stayed firmly locked on her, and it was getting increasingly stuffy and airless, especially after her exertions.

A look at her watch showed that it was over an hour since Stefano had gone, and she could have panicked, had she allowed herself to, when she thought of how long it would probably be before anyone else came to view the old house. Somehow she must find a way out—no one else was likely, to rescue her.

She sighed ruefully for the days of long hair and hairpins, running despairing fingers through her own short locks. There was nothing she could use and no one to hear no matter how hard she thumped on the unyielding doors. Tired and frightened, she slumped down into the bottom of the wardrobe and tried to think coherently, although her mind seemed to be a complete blank and not one bright idea came into it.

After two hours, she was feeling drowsy with the stale air and her head ached abominably. Great tears rolled down her face when she thought of Aunt Celia and Stefano being back at Greggan Bar by now and probably wondering where she was. It would

never occur to them that she was a prisoner with little hope of being found, and the old house on the creek was the last place they would think of looking for her.

She must have fallen asleep, she thought, for the next thing she became conscious of was someone lifting her up and carrying her down some stairs, although it took her some time to realise which stairs it was. There was something so reassuring about the arms that carried her, however, that she felt disinclined to take too much notice of where she was, content to simply keep her eyes closed and breathe in the blessedly cool air, even if it did smell rather of dust and aged wood.

She must have stirred slightly, for her rescuer spoke to her, his breath close enough to warm her cheek. 'Alison ' There was no mistaking that accented second syllable, and she opened her eyes only very reluctantly, and looked up in to Stefano's anxious face.

'Hello,' she whispered, and thought she smiled.

He did not smile, but looked quite a bit older, she thought, than the last time she had seen him, his black eyes searching her face as if seeking reassurance that she really was all right. 'How do you feel?' he asked.

'I—O.K., I think,' she told him. The light made her head ache worse than ever and she wanted to close her eyes again.

'Do not try to talk yet,' he said, taking her out in to the ripe, golden evening sunshine.

Out here the air smelled wonderful and she could even distinguish the scent of the roses at the side of

the house, wondering vaguely what had happened to the bloom she had plucked and cherished so briefly.

'The roses,' she said solemnly, as he put her carefully into the passenger seat of the car. 'They smell lovely.'

He glanced at her, as if he feared she might be rambling, then smiled, reassured by her expression. 'If it had not been for one of those roses,' he told her quietly, 'you might not have been found so soon.'

She turned heavy-lidded eyes to look at him enquiringly as he took his place behind the wheel. 'A rose?' she asked vaguely, and he nodded, reaching into the glove compartment and showing her a wilted, but still perfumed, dark red rose.

'I found it by the wardrobe,' he told her. 'That is what made me come back here. You probably owe your life to that rose, *bella mia*.'



## CHAPTER SEVEN

AUNT CELIA had been very nearly in tears when Stefano carried her into the house, and Alison felt a momentary flick of panic when she thought how much worse the outcome could have been if she had not been found. Doctor Fison had declared her to be in much better shape than she had any right to expect, and told her she could get up the next day only if she felt well enough. In the meantime she was to stay where *she* was.

Only a slight headache remained next morning, to remind her of her narrow escape, and it was such a lovely bright morning again that *she* decided she would get up regardless of anyone else's opinion. An earlier visit by her aunt with a cup of tea had brought a doubtful frown when she announced her intention, and an observation that Stefano would think she was being rash clinched her determination.

'I'm perfectly O.K. except for a slight headache,' she insisted, when Aunt Celia shook her head. 'And I'd much rather get up, Aunt Celia.'

'I know, dear,' her aunt said, a worried look in her eyes when she remembered again how close tragedy had been. 'But you really should rest for a bit, you know.'

'Don't worry ' Alison patted her aunt's hand reassuringly. 'I'm as fit as a fiddle.'

'I shudder every time I think about it,' her aunt

confessed. 'If it hadn't been for Stefano's powers of observation *and* deduction, you might never have been found—or not until much too late, anyway.'

Alison looked at her curiously, thinking about her rescue for the first time. 'How *did* he realise I was there?' she asked. 'I've not given it much thought until now.'

A rather ironic smile crossed her aunt's face and she sat on the edge of the bed, evidently prepared to linger for a while. 'No,' she said, 'one does rather tend to take Stefano's omniscience for granted.'

Alison was prepared neither to support nor deny the theory, but she was curious **to** know how her solitary walk and its ultimate destination had been discovered. 'How did he guess where **I'd** gone?' she asked. 'I remember he said something about a rose, but I was much too fuzzy at the time to take much notice of anything anyone said. What was he doing there, anyway?'

'Did you realise he's in the property business?' Aunt Celia asked, and she nodded, a gesture that brought a momentary flick of an eyebrow from her aunt.

'I didn't until a few days ago,' Alison said. 'It was quite a surprise, I'd always pictured him as the gentleman of leisure, somehow.'

'It was a surprise to me too,' Aunt Celia admitted, rather surprisingly to Alison. 'I had no idea he was a property tycoon until yesterday.'

'You hadn't?'

Her aunt looked at her a bit strangely, but she made no comment on her surprise, for the moment. 'None at all. Then he told me he was meeting an

old friend who was also interested in the old Barmon house. That's how it came out.'

'An old friend?' Alison frowned curiously, remembering how she had thought the woman with Stefano had sounded fairly young and rather bored, and she wondered just how close a friend she was of Stefano's.

Aunt Celia nodded, her expression non-committal, so that Alison could not even guess what her reaction was to the 'old friend', or even if she was reacting at all. 'He picked her up in Skarren when he dropped me off,' she said. 'A rather blasé-looking blonde girl with very expensive tastes, if her clothes were anything to judge by.'

Alison could not help wondering if jealousy had tinged the rather tart description, but she was interested to hear more about the prospective client for the old house. 'That's just about how she sounded too,' she told her aunt. 'Although I couldn't actually hear the words of anything she said. Her tone of voice was unutterably bored.' She smiled a trifle maliciously. 'Not at all what Stefano's used to, I imagine.'

Aunt Celia smiled wryly. 'Darling,' she admonished gently, 'that's very unkind in the circumstances.'

'Yes, I suppose it is,' Alison admitted. 'But she didn't sound at all the type of person who would want to buy that lovely old house.'

One of Aunt Celia's brows elevated in comment. 'I thought you described it to me before as scruffy,' she said.

'So I did, but it isn't. Not when you get closer to

it and really look at it. It has great possibilities--I agree with Stefano.'

'I never thought I'd live to see the day,' Aunt Celia remarked. 'You and Stefano in agreement about something.'

'But I just can't imagine that woman being the type to like it,' Alison said, determinedly ignoring the remark.

'Actually I gathered it was for her mother,' Aunt Celia said. 'So Stefano told me.'

'Oh, I see.' That, Alison thought, explained the lack of interest in the wardrobe. 'But you were going to tell me how Stefano came to know *I* was there. It must have been a fabulous stroke of luck.'

'It wasn't entirely luck, I should say,' Aunt Celia told her, and eyed her curiously for a moment. 'It was very unlike you to go prowling around empty houses, darling, wasn't it? I can't for the life of me think what possessed you. And as for climbing in through a window—well! Did you have a sudden urge to take up housebreaking, or are you catching on to some of Danny's more anti-social ideas?'

Alison flushed resentment of the jibe, and she knew her aunt already regretted having made it. 'That wasn't very kind either,' she told her.

'No, darling, it wasn't, and I'm sorry, but I still can't visualise you as a housebreaker.'

Alison smiled ruefully. 'No, neither can I,' she confessed. 'It must have been a sudden rush of blood to the head, I suppose. Anyway, I certainly shan't be doing it again in a hurry, I can promise you that.'

'Apparently Stefano noticed that open window

when they were looking at the ground floor rooms,' Aunt Celia told her. 'Then he found a rose in one of the bedrooms — it all sounded most unlikely, but he swears it's true.'

'It is,' Alison told her. 'I picked it when I went round the side of the house. There's a beautiful Ena Harkness on a trellis there, and I couldn't resist taking one.'

'Well, in the circumstances, it's as well you did. It puzzled Stefano for a bit,' her aunt went on. 'He could see it was a freshly picked bloom, so he knew whoever had picked it and dropped it had either not long gone, or was still there.'

'Brilliant deduction!' Alison remarked, a smile taking the edge off the words.

'I thought so,' her aunt said.

'But he didn't try to find out who it was?'

Aunt Celia shrugged. 'Evidently not. You know Stefano, he's not averse to a bit of romantic intrigue.'

'Isn't he?'

Aunt Celia shook her head. 'He says he thought it might have been a young couple with ideas bigger than their pockets, and who'd taken advantage of the open window. And when the wardrobe door was stuck he was convinced they must be still hiding in there.'

Alison stared at her. 'Do you mean that door really *was* stuck?'

Her aunt shrugged. 'So he says. Anyway, he thought that whoever it was would come out as soon as he and his client were gone and leave via the front door with no one any the wiser.'

'But—but what made him think I might be there?'

'Heaven knows,' her aunt said. 'Intuition maybe, but whatever it was, thank heaven he *was* inspired. When the time went on and you still didn't come, we began to get fidgety about you being so long, so he went down to the village to see if Danny had seen anything of you, and

'Danny?' Alison gazed at her unbelievably. 'Do you mean he called on Danny?' It was something she could not easily imagine, although she could imagine Danny's reaction easily enough.

'Well, not on Danny himself, as it happened,' Aunt Celia said. 'He wasn't there, but Mrs. Clay said she'd seen you earlier, when she was talking to a neighbour of hers, and she thought she'd noticed you going across the field towards Creek Lane.' She shrugged. 'That was enough for Stefano—he put two and two together again, and prayed he was right. As it happened his gamble paid off, thank heaven, and he found you locked in that wretched cupboard.'

'Thank heaven,' Alison echoed fervently. 'It was pure Sherlock Holmes stuff, wasn't it?'

'He's pretty sharp,' her aunt agreed blandly. 'Stefano's not short on brains.'

'Apparently not.' Alison frowned curiously when something else came to mind. 'There's one thing, though, Aunt Celia—how did he get back into the house? Did he use that window like I did? Surely he didn't still have the keys, did he? Didn't he take them back when he took his client back?'

'Back where?'

'Well, to the agents or wherever he had them from.'

'Oh no,' Aunt Celia informed her blandly. 'He bought the house several days ago.'

Danny was rather unsympathetically matter-of-fact when Alison relayed her near escape to him the following evening, and she felt that at least he might have shown a little concern at how close she had come to suffocating in that dark and dusty wardrobe. Danny, it seemed, could be disappointingly ungallant.

'Of all the stupid things to do,' he said bluntly. 'What in the name of heaven possessed you to go climbing in windows and locking yourself in cupboards?'

'*One* window, and *one* cupboard,' Alison corrected him defensively, 'and that was a wardrobe. I can see,' she added, 'that I needn't have bothered about you worrying about me, even if I *had* stifled to death in the wretched thing.'

Danny hugged her, dropping a casual kiss on the top of her nose. 'Oh, you pie-eyed little goof, of course I'm concerned when you take leave of your senses,' he told her. 'But the fact remains that it was a damned stupid thing to do.'

'Stefano was very worried about me.' She looked at him from under her thick lashes and was surprised to find herself being so deliberately provocative.

The muscles in his jaw tightened ominously and his mouth was a tight straight line. 'That practised

continental charm, no doubt,' he said acidly. 'Rescuing fair damsels in distress is all part of the act, isn't it?'

'I don't know,' Alison retorted swiftly. 'Is it?'

He said nothing for a moment, then he hugged her again and kissed her with a little more enthusiasm this time. 'You could say I'm a bit green-eyed,' he admitted frankly, with a wry grin. 'He seems to have quite a lot of your time lately.'

'With a purpose,' Alison reminded him. 'Or had you forgotten?'

'Not forgotten,' he said gloomily, 'given up hope.'

'Oh, Danny, you haven't, have you?' She eyed him anxiously, and he smiled.

'Not altogether,' he confessed. 'But you don't seem to be doing very well in that direction, do you, darling?'

'I'm trying—whenever I can.'

'You'd better try a bit harder, my sweet, or we shall run out of time, or garages.'

'I'm sorry.' She walked along with him, his arm round her shoulders, a small worried frown between her brows when she thought of the marathon task she had been set—to try and persuade Stefano to release enough money to buy Danny his garage and, at the same time, enable them to get married.

He smiled down at her, his light eyes speculative as he studied her. 'You *are* really trying, aren't you, darling?' he asked, and she looked up at him with wide eyes.

'Yes, of course I am I ' she said indignantly.

'I just wondered.'

'Why on earth should you wonder?'



He shrugged. 'I don't know quite,' he admitted. 'I've thought once or twice lately that maybe your heart wasn't in it.'

'Oh, Danny!'

'Oh, Alison!' He kissed her. 'Well, you'd better issue an ultimatum, darling, because there are only two weeks more before I have to decide whether to take a job in Australia.'

The words fell like a bombshell and Alison stared at him for a moment in silence, not quite believing she had heard him aright. 'You—you're going to Australia?'

He shrugged again. 'I have the opportunity of a job there,' he said. 'But I'd still rather have the garage and stay here. However——'

'You—you want to go?' He shrugged again. 'On your own?'

'I'm afraid so,' he told her, with remarkable aplomb, she felt, in the circumstances. 'There's no provision for a wife, and actually it sounds rather good.'

'I see.'

His arm hugged her closer and he smiled down at her frown. 'So you see, darling,' he told her, 'it all depends on you, what and where and everything else.'

'But, Danny, you—you wouldn't just leave me. Would you?'

'I haven't much choice, darling, have I?'

'Danny——'

'It's your choice, darling,' he insisted, still sounding far too relentless about it, she felt. 'Either you prise some of that money out of Illari and set me-

us up in business over here, or I shall be leaving for pastures more green. I shall be sorry to go, you must know that, but needs must when the devil drives.'

'Yes. Yes, of course I realise you have to find something soon. You've been off work so much lately, haven't you?'

'Too much,' he agreed. 'And I feel like making a stand now, one way or the other.'

'I'll try again,' she said, feeling suddenly very small and vulnerable. 'I'll ask him again, Danny.'

He tipped her face up to look at him and planted a light kiss on her mouth. 'You do that, darling girl.'

It was not going to be easy at all, Alison decided, when she came down to breakfast next morning. She had half hoped that Aunt Celia would not be there so that she could have Stefano's ear to herself for a little while at least, but her aunt came from her room as Alison started downstairs, and called after her.

'You're an early bird this morning,' she told her with a smile. 'It isn't often you beat me to the bathroom. What happened, darling? Feeling energetic?'

Alison smiled, trying not to show her disappointment at not being even more early. 'Not really,' she admitted, and wondered if she should tell her aunt the reason for her prompt rising. 'I—I wanted to have a word with Stefano,' she added, and looked through her lashes to see if there was any reaction to that.

There wasn't, apart from a faint knowing smile

that Alison found rather annoying. 'You haven't had much success with getting Danny's money, have you?' she asked, and Alison flushed.

'*It isn't* Danny's money, Aunt Celia,' she told her shortly. 'It's *mine* and Danny's, and I think Stefano's been very unreasonable about it so far.'

'But you're hoping to change his mind?' her aunt asked, and she nodded.

'I'm going to try. I must try again—Stefano *must* listen to me, Aunt Celia. It's—it's much more important now.'

Her aunt looked at her shrewdly as they walked down the wide staircase together. 'Why so much more, all of a sudden?' she asked.

'Because if I don't get it,' Alison said, sounding desperate, 'Danny's going abroad.'

'Is he?'

Alison looked at her reproachfully. 'I know it may not sound very important to you, Aunt Celia, but it is to me.'

'Of course it is, darling.' A consoling arm encircled her shoulders and she knew that her aunt was being far more understanding than she appeared. 'But I don't hold out much hope for you ever getting Stefano to see *eye* to eye with you on that point.'

'I can't think *why* he's being so—so stubborn,' Alison complained, as they came across the hall. 'Unless he just wants to exercise his—his power.'

Aunt Celia smiled and hugged her again. 'That's exaggerating rather, dear,' she told her, and Alison sighed, stopped suddenly in the middle of the hall, looking at her aunt with curious eyes.

'Aunt Celia, you wouldn't—I mean would you ' Aunt Celia, however, was already shaking her head slowly, although her smile was gentle and understanding.

'I don't think I'd be any more successful than you've been, darling,' she told her. 'In fact I'm quite sure I wouldn't be.'

'But he'd listen to you! '

Her aunt smiled. 'I can't think what gives you that idea,' she said. 'And I certainly don't *want* to argue with him over this particular issue, as I thought you realised.'

'I know you said so, at the beginning,' Alison admitted. 'But—well, I thought you might have changed your mind.'

'I haven't,' Aunt Celia told her frankly. 'I don't dislike Danny, but I'm one of those old-fashioned people who think that a husband should provide for his wife and not the other way around.'

'But that's—that's not fair,' Alison protested. 'Danny hasn't *got* the money, and I have ! At least I would have if Stefano wasn't so bent on playing Scrooge on my behalf '

Her aunt shrugged. 'Well, you can try again, Alison dear,' she told her. 'But I really can't see Stefano changing his mind about it.'

'Never?'

'Never. I'm sorry, dear, but I really can't bring myself to ask him on your behalf, and I'm quite sure I'd be no more successful than you've been.'

Alison looked at her meaningly, her blue eyes dark with disappointment. 'I'm sure you would be,' she said, and went into the dining room without stop-

ping to enlarge on her meaning.

Stefano got up as they came in, and smiled at them both in turn, evidently sensing something amiss as he looked from one to the other. 'Good morning.'

'Good morning, Stefano.' Aunt Celia made a brief, wry face at him, and Alison thought she was not meant to see either that or the fleeting smile of understanding that he gave her in return. It was that secret, aggravating rapport between them that added fuel to her already short temper, and she barely murmured a greeting as she sat herself down at the table.

'Are you doing anything very special this morning?'

Alison looked up, startled to find that it was herself being addressed, and nodded first, then shook her head when she remembered that Danny had cancelled a date they had had, because he said he had to go in to Darly. He had not asked her to go with him, so she assumed it was something to do with another job.

Stefano's black eyes were watching her steadily and she felt the colour flood into her face, for no good reason that she could think of, unless she was already anticipating further efforts to coax him into changing his mind about the money.

'I am going to take the boat round as far as Crag's Head this morning,' he told her. 'I wondered if you would like to come with me, huh?'

'Me?' She looked at him uncertainly for a moment then flicked a brief, enquiring glance at her aunt, who appeared not at all concerned about the invita-

tion. 'Aunt Celia\_\_\_\_' she began, and he laughed softly, cocking a very suggestive eyebrow at her aunt, a liberty she seemed not to resent in the least, although she did look a little startled initially.

'I suspect that Celia is to visit her dentist again, is that not so, Celia?' he asked.

Aunt Celia nodded, a slow smile answering the challenge of his question. 'I do have another appointment,' she confessed, and Alison looked at her curiously.

'Again, Aunt Celia?'

'Again,' her aunt agreed. 'I suppose you think I'm spending a lot of time there lately, but I really do need a lot doing to my teeth,' she said.

To Alison's surprise Stefano laughed softly, as if the idea amused him intensely, and once again Aunt Celia appeared not to resent it, although she did look at him with a faint moue of reproach.

'So you see,' Stefano told Alison, with his hands spread wide. 'Your aunt does not need your company, and I am asking, very nicely I think, no? that you come with me to Crag's Head in the boat.'

Alison hesitated for only a moment, then she nodded. After all, it was rather too good an opportunity to miss when she so desperately needed to see him alone. It would be easier to ask him if they were not face to face at the table as they were now, but at the same time she must make quite sure that things did not get out of hand again as they had for that brief moment at Heron's Point.

'Thank you,' she said quietly. 'I'd like to come very much, Stefano.' Her aunt, she thought, looked almost as pleased at her answer as Stefano did, and

that puzzled her.

It was little more than an hour later that they were speeding their way across the water round the coast towards Crag's Head, and Alison lifted her face gratefully to the brisk wind they were creating. Stefano turned his head and smiled, his black eyes impenetrable but glowing with some expression that both puzzled and disturbed her.

Crag's Head was further round the coast than anywhere she had so far been with him, and she was still a little unsure that she had done the right thing in accepting the invitation so lightly. There was something about his manner today that was inexplicably different, although it would have been hard to pinpoint any particular way in which it differed.

'Why Crag's Head?' she asked, above the sound of the powerful engine, and the opposition of the whipping wind.

He turned again and smiled at her. 'Why not?' he countered.

She shrugged, then came and stood beside him, behind the glass screen where the wind was a little less brisk and she could speak to him without shouting. 'I just wondered if you had any special objective in mind,' she told him. 'A house to look at, or something like that.'

He shook his head. 'No house, *piccola*, just a ride to enjoy ourselves. Are you not enjoying it?' She nodded, and he took a hand from the wheel briefly to lift her chin. 'Then smile, *bella mia*.'

She obeyed, briefly, then resumed her slightly troubled expression. It was not going to be easy at all, bringing the subject round to the money when

Stefano was only intent on enjoying himself. She sighed and went and sat down again while he manoeuvred the boat past the sandbanks that protected the little cove below Crag's Head.

It was only a very small cove that lay back in the shadow of the great crag, and the only mooring available for the boat was a rather rickety pole that stuck up from the remains of a breakwater, so that Alison eyed it rather doubtfully. His skill with a boat was undeniable, but just the same she experienced a few bad moments while he brought them safely up to the pole and jumped nimbly ashore to tie up.

They were required to walk along what was not much more than a plank to the beach, and she clung to his hand tightly as he guided her along and on to the sandy cove with the headland towering over it. The crag itself swept down sharply at either side to rocks and boulders which in turn gave way gradually to grassy dunes and beyond them to an expanse of grassland stretching as far as the road.

It was a quiet, rather impressive place that she had visited at other times, but never before from the sea, and she looked up at the headland, overawed for a moment. 'You seem to know your way around,' she remarked as they stepped on to shifting sand at last, and he looked down at her and smiled.

'I found this place first on a map,' he told her. 'Then I came to explore and found it rather delightful. Do you not agree?'

'It's very nice,' she said, her mind rather more on what her own action should be than on their surroundings, and he pulled a wry face.



'Nice !' he echoed. 'That sounds very much like British understatement.'

'I—I suppose it is,' she agreed, realising that he was still holding her hand, although they were well away from the rickety breakwater and any danger of her slipping.

She tried to free his hold, but he merely tightened his fingers and smiled down at her in a way that was not exactly encouraging when she considered how far they were from home, and how isolated. 'Why are you so—nervous, *piccola*?' he asked softly, sitting down on the warm sand and pulling her down beside him.

'I'm not !'

'But you are,' he argued with a knowing smile that she would liked to have done something about. He was going to be difficult, that was obvious, and she wondered uneasily if he already knew what her prime object had been in coming with him.

'I wish you wouldn't try reading my mind,' she retorted, and he laughed.

'Am I doing that?' he asked. 'Or is it that you have something on your mind that is making you uneasy, huh?'

'No! No, of course I haven't! ' From his smile she thought he did not believe her, but she determinedly chose to ignore it and leaned back on her elbows, closing her eyes against the sun.

It was incredibly peaceful and quiet here on the tiny beach, hidden from everyone and everything except the sea which glittered like molten glass in the hot sun, and she thought how wonderful it would be if only it could go on for ever. Not with Stefano,

of course, she reminded herself hastily, but with Danny.

Of course Danny would have very little time to come and laze on beaches like Stefano did. He would be working for most of the time in the garage, and she would have to take a part of the chores too. She was not too fond of cars and had no inclination at all to discover the intricacies of the car engines, but if that was what Danny wanted she would have to learn and get used to the smell of oil and petrol.

She had earned her own living before she inherited her great-grandfather's money, if she had really inherited it, which she often doubted when Stefano was so intent on depriving her of it. She could easily go back to working again without too much hardship, although she had to admit that she had acquired a taste for the good things in life.

She glanced from under her lashes at Stefano, beside her on the hot sand, and wondered if she would ever persuade him to be reasonable about it. He was lying full length and he opened one *eye* as if he felt her watching him, reaching out with one hand to touch hers, a smile on his face as he looked up at her.

'What are you so curious about, *piccola?*' he asked, and she shook her head, turning her head away hastily.

'Nothing. I'm not curious.'

His smile widened, startlingly white in the dark face. 'I do not believe you,' he said.

Alison shrugged. 'I don't really care if you do or not,' she told him. 'I was—I was only thinking that you look quite at home here. Much more than I do,

because you're so dark.'

'And you are so fair, *piccola*.' He played gently with the fingers of her hand. '*So—bells !*'

'But I'm dark-haired,' she objected, half smiling. 'You have blue eyes.'

'So I have.' She lowered the eyes in question and kept them averted, for her heart was racing quite ridiculously fast against her ribs and she wished she could do something to control it. 'But I'm still not fair.'

He laughed softly, running one finger down her arm and making her shiver involuntarily. 'Is it not a word for beautiful?' he asked, and she smiled understanding. 'And you mean to use it to your advantage, hmm?'

She frowned. 'No, of course I don't I—I don't know why you think I'd want to do that.'

'Aaah !' His exaggerated moan of disappointment made her colour furiously. 'And I thought you would be trying to—' Expressive shoulders lifted meaningfully before he raised himself on to one elbow and captured both her hands. 'Is that not why you came with me, *amante mia*? So that you could—persuade me?'

Alison's heart banged away crazily when she thought of how she had planned to do just that, and now here he was making a lighthearted joke of it. How could she hope to use her powers of persuasion when he anticipated her every time? It was maddening the way he foresaw her every move, and she wished Danny would not be so insistent that she should keep on trying.

She pulled her hands free of his and sat upright,

her face telling its own story, a suspicious brightness in her blue eyes as she looked down, slightly sulky, at her hands clasped on her lap. 'wish you'd stop trying to make me look small,' she told him. 'You just can't resist making fun of me, can you, Stefano?'

He looked at her steadily, resting on one elbow still, a small wry smile crooking his mouth, as if he guessed exactly how she felt. 'No more than you can resist trying to make me change my mind about giving your Danny that money,' he said softly, and Alison turned on him angrily.

'Oh, you're as bad as Aunt Celia,' she told him. 'It *isn't* just for Danny, it's for me too, can't you understand that?'

He sighed, rather surprisingly. 'I wish I could,' he said. 'But it seems to me that Danny will be the one who gains in every way. He will have his garage, and you too.'

'He'll have neither if you *don't let* me have the money,' she said desperately, seeing yet another opportunity slipping away, and he looked at her with curious eyes.

'Do you mean he will not have you without the money?' he asked quietly, and she hastily shook her head.

'No, no, of course I don't mean that,' she said, then realised that that was exactly what it did mean. 'At least,' she amended cautiously, 'he—he's going away if you—if we can't have the garage.'

'Away?'

She nodded. 'To Australia.'

'Without you?' She nodded, and he reached for

one of her hands again. 'Then he is a fool,' he said softly. 'You are worth more than any amount of money, *cara mia*—does he not see that?'

She refused to recognise the implication in the words, intent only with impressing upon him the importance of letting her have the money so that Danny need not go away. She turned and looked at him. At the dark, expressive face and the glowing black eyes that somehow seemed even more disturbing suddenly when he held her gaze.

She reached out one hand and touched his face, her eyes half hidden by their fringe of dark lashes, urged on by something she did not quite understand but which quickened her pulse and made her half turn towards him with only one object in mind. 'Please, Stefano,' she pleaded softly. 'Please let me have the money. I'll—I'll do anything you want, if you'll let me

He sat up then, one hand sweeping aside her caressing fingers from his cheek, and with such an air of purpose that she was silenced before the sentence was finished. His fingers dug hard into her arms as he pulled her right round to face him, and his eyes glowed like live coals as he looked down at her.

'I do not think you mean that, *piccola*,' he said in a tight, hard voice she did not recognise.

'I do,' she cried. 'I want that money! I *need* it, Stefano, and I—I don't care *what I*

'Be quiet!' He shook her hard, his eyes blazing now with such fury she would not have believed it possible, and there was a taut, almost cruel look about his mouth with absolutely no hint of a smile.

'You—' He took a deep breath, and his fine nostrils flared briefly as he sought to control his temper. 'You little fool! You would make a promise like that, just to get the money?' His voice was cold and hard as steel and she did nothing but stare at him, realising at last just what the impression was she had given him. 'You can thank heaven that **I** did not take advantage of your—your offer,' he told her, and dropped his hands suddenly as if he could not even bear to touch her.

'Stefano——'

'**I** could make you pay for the favour you ask, as you so generously offered,' he told her, ignoring her attempt to speak, 'but it is not the way **I** want you, Alison. **I** do not have to bribe my way to such—such favours.' He smiled, a cold, hard smile that she hated to see, for he looked as if he despised her. 'You would not even have a guarantee that **I** would keep my side of the bargain even, so you are a poor bargainer, Alison. But,' he shrugged his shoulders, 'if **the** money means so much to you, you can have it, with my blessing!' His eyes raked swiftly over her and he laughed shortly. 'I wish you luck with your Danny!'

It was more than she could bear, to see him so plainly disgusted with her, and she scrambled to her feet, no longer even caring that she had at last achieved her goal, the tears running unchecked down her face as she turned away from him. Across the small, sandy beach she went, to where the dunes rose under their spiky grass fringes and where she could be out of sight of him.

It would be a long weary walk to the road, and

further still all the way back to Creggan, but she would rather have walked fifty miles than go back in the boat with him. Faintly, as she ran across the springy, warm-smelling turf, she heard his voice following her from the top of the dunes.

'Alison! '

The exaggerated second syllable of her name sounded even more accented and she bit on her lip as she went blindly on, refusing to either turn or even hesitate, with tears rolling down her hot face, anxious only to make her own way, anywhere away from that look she had seen in his eyes.

'Alison! '

She shook her head, as if he was near enough to see it, and went on towards the road. There was no going back now with Stefano, and it dawned on her suddenly that it should not have mattered so much, since she could now marry Danny, which was what she had wanted all along.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**HAD** it not been for the thought of worrying Aunt Celia with her absence, Alison would not *even* have bothered telephoning to explain that she would not be back in time for lunch. It had been a long, hot walk to find a telephone box, after she had reached the road, and she had no money with her so that she was obliged to reverse the charges.

Mrs. Dawlish answered the call and Alison was already relaying her message when, after a few mumbled words, the housekeeper handed over the call to Aunt Celia. 'Darling,' her aunt said, 'where on earth *are* you?'

'I don't know exactly,' said Alison. 'Somewhere along the road between Crag's Head and Skarren I hope.'

'Mrs. Dawlish was saying you told her something about not being back in time for lunch.'

'That's right. It'll take me at least another hour and a half to walk from here. Probably longer, and it's so hot I couldn't possibly hurry. But please don't wait for me, just have your lunch.'

'Alison dear,' she suspected her aunt was smiling, perhaps even laughing quietly to herself as she spoke, 'you sound rather melodramatically sorry for yourself, and why on earth are you walking?'

Alison sighed, a little hurt by the suggestion of self-pity.

'Because I haven't any money with me,' she said.



'That's why I had to reverse the charges on this call.'

'There was a few seconds' thoughtful silence. 'What I really meant, dear,' Aunt Celia said then, 'was why aren't you with Stefano?'

'Hasn't he told you that?'

'No, dear, he hasn't, and you went out with him, so why aren't you with him now? What's happened?'

She sounded anxious, Alison thought, and took time to think before she answered. Stefano should have been back long ago and it did not sound logical that he had not already told her aunt his version of what had happened. Unless, of course, he had stayed on at Crag's Head in the hope that she would come back.

'Hasn't Stefano come back yet?' she asked, and immediately thought of a dozen alternatives to his having stayed where she had left him, all of them more hair-raising than the last.

'No, he hasn't,' Aunt Celia told her, and sounded a little uneasy herself. 'Alison, why aren't you with him, wherever he is? What's happened out there?'

'*We—we* quarrelled.' If that was not strictly true, it was as near as no matter.

Certainly- Stefano had been angry enough to quarrel, if she had stayed long enough to argue with him. Only it would have been too humiliating to stay after the way he had spoken to her, and she was still horribly uncertain whether he had misjudged her or not. She had not intended to sound so boldly provocative, but she had to admit that her words could have been more easily interpreted that way than any other.

'Oh, Alison '

Her aunt sounded, to her sensitive ears, as if she already knew who was to blame for the quarrel, and Alison was immediately on the defensive. 'It wasn't my fault,' she protested, automatically, then shook her head when she considered the facts again. 'That's not strictly true,' she added. 'I--I suppose I started it.'

'So then what happened?' Her aunt sounded resigned.

'I—I just ran off and left him.'

'At Crag's Head?'

'Yes.'

'Darling, with that long walk back, that was rather rash of you, wasn't it? Didn't you think about that?'

'No, I didn't,' Alison declared shortly.

'Well, he's either stayed on in the hope that you'd come back,' her aunt speculated, 'or something's happened to him on the way home.'

*"It was a very cold day."*

suddenly cold and heavy as lead when she thought of that sleek, speeding monster bouncing across the water, and of those treacherous sand banks below Crag's Head.

'Oh, he'll be all right,' Aunt Celia assured her. 'And in the meantime you've got yourself stranded somewhere along the Skarren road?'

'Well, I'm not exactly stranded,' Alison argued. 'I *can* walk, but it'll take me a long time, and I didn't want you worrying about me not being in for lunch. That's why I rang.'

'You're a silly girl,' her aunt scolded. 'I'll get the

car out and come and fetch you.°

‘No, really, Aunt Celia, there's no need!’

‘Of course there is!’ her aunt retorted. ‘You can't walk all that way back and go without lunch as well. I'll be with you in no time if you stay where you are.’ There were background sounds suddenly and she heard her aunt's voice only faintly for a few moments, as if she had her head turned away from the instrument. ‘Well, at least one of you is back safely,’ she said a moment later. ‘Stefano's just come in.’

Something uncontrollable fluttered relief in her breast at that, and she spoke almost without thinking. ‘Don't let *him* come for me, Aunt Celia, please!’

A wry chuckle crackled along the line and Aunt Celia lowered her voice. ‘From the look in his face he doesn't know whether to be angry or worried about you,’ she told her. ‘So *I'll* come and fetch you, just in case the two of you start all over again.’

‘Thank you, Aunt Celia.’

Alison sat and waited on a low wooden fence at the edge of a spinney, feeling rather disconsolate and definitely uneasy at the prospect of having to sit and face Stefano at the table after all. It was, she supposed with a sigh after a while, something she would have to do sooner or later, and better to get it over with.

It did not seem too long before she saw her aunt's little blue car coming along the road, and she raised one hand in greeting, stepping out of the welcome shade into the road. Aunt Celia, she thought, looked faintly amused when she stopped the car and

waited while she settled in her seat, so that she wondered if Stefano had already told her his version of the incident.

'Well,' Aunt Celia said, as they set off back towards home, 'you *do* look hot and bothered, darling. What on earth have you and Stefano been quarrelling about now?'

'Oh\_\_\_\_' Alison shrugged uneasily, 'just the usual things.'

'Pretty serious things, by the look of Stefano's face,' her aunt said, and glanced at her briefly. 'Do you want, to tell me about it?'

Alison thought she did, but finding the right words, without making her own part in it sound much worse than it was, made it difficult. And she could not even be sure that Aunt Celia would automatically be in sympathy with *her*.

'I—I don't know,' she said.

'Well, only if you want to, of course,' Aunt Celia told her. 'It isn't really any of my business, but I do hate to see you looking so unhappy, and you and Stefano seemed to have. been getting along so much better lately.'

'We shan't any longer,' said Alison, without perhaps realising quite how regretful she sounded about it. 'In fact I'll be surprised if he even speaks to me again.'

'Oh dear!' Her aunt pulled a face. 'What *have* you been up to, darling?'

'Nothing! It's just that—that I didn't realise Stefano was so—so straight-laced.'

'Is he?' Another glance flickered in her direction, and her aunt's elegant brows expressed surprise.

'Apparently. He was angry enough about me.'

'Were you fishing for that money, for Danny's garage again?' Aunt Celia asked, and Alison frowned her dislike of the way the question was worded.

She had forgotten about his having agreed to let her have the money at long last, but she supposed she could have claimed the outing had been a success, even if it had been something of a disaster as well.

'He *did* say we could have the money for the garage,' she told her aunt.

'Oh well, that's something, I suppose,' Aunt Celia said, with a marked lack of enthusiasm. 'Is that what caused the rift?'

'In a way.'

Aunt Celia sighed. 'Darling,' she said with exaggerated patience, 'don't think I'm not in sympathy with you, and if you don't want to, don't tell me what happened, but please don't offer me little bits and pieces, it's maddening. Like trying to get blood out of a stone.'

'I'm sorry.'

She was going to cry again, Alison knew it, and she felt the first big, warm tears rolling down her cheeks to plop dismally on to her tightly clasped hands. She dare not say any more or she would have cried like a baby and made a complete fool of herself, so she simply sat there, blind to everything, while her aunt drove them home.

It was several moments before she sensed her aunt looking at her and then, a moment later, the car stopped suddenly at the side of the road and

gentle hands covered hers. 'Tell me all of it, darling,' Aunt Celia told her kindly. 'You'll feel much better if you do.'

So it came out, tumbling out in words that did not always make sense, but which seemed to convey to her listener just how abject she felt, even though she had at last managed to achieve her object. 'I—I didn't *mean* it like that, Aunt Celia,' she sobbed. 'Not *just* like that, not the way he made it sound, and he was so—so——'

'Latin?' Aunt Celia suggested softly, so that Alison looked at her with red-rimmed, tearful eyes, suspecting facetiousness. 'Oh, the men play around,' her aunt went on wryly, 'but they expect their women to be less free and easy.'

'But I'm *not* his women,' Alison protested breathlessly.

Aunt Celia smiled slowly. 'In a way you are, darling,' she argued gently. 'It's all in the family, so to speak.'

It was a new and interesting thought—the idea that Stefano considered her his family—and she pondered on it for a moment. 'Just the same,' she said at last, 'he had no right to act the way he did. He looked at me as if—as if he despised me for the lowest thing on earth. And I think he does—I just can't face the thought of living in the same house with him ever \*again.'

'Alison dear, you're being melodramatic again,' Aunt Celia told her with a smile. 'Sometimes you're almost as much a Latin as Stefano. More so most of the time, in fact, he doesn't often go off bang—it must be quite an impressive sight when he does.'

'I felt I wanted to crawl away somewhere and die,' Alison said bitterly. 'I can't face him again, Aunt Celia, I just can't!'

'Oh, darling, of course you can.' She mopped her face gently with her own handkerchief. 'If I know Stefano, he's already forgotten all about it. Now you do the same and think about telling Danny his good news.'

'He—he will be pleased.'

'Of course he will!' Aunt Celia smiled and started the engine again. 'And you'll feel so much better when you've had a nice cool wash and some lunch.'

Washed, changed and definitely feeling better, Alison came downstairs to lunch. She could hear voices in the dining room as she crossed the hall, and wondered if Aunt Celia was interceding on her behalf with Stefano—asking him not to be too cold and distant. Because if he was, Alison felt sure she would simply curl up and die, no matter what Aunt Celia said about it.

When she opened the door her aunt looked across at her and smiled encouragingly. Stefano inclined his black head in a much more formal greeting and said nothing. 'I—I'm sorry I'm late,' she apologised. 'It took me longer than I expected to wash and change.'

'Don't worry, darling,' Aunt Celia told her cheerfully. 'There's plenty of time.'

Alison looked across at Stefano through the fringe of her lashes, but he was ringing to let Mrs. Dawlish know they were ready for their lunch, and

he did not even look at her. It looked, after all, as if he meant to be merely formally polite, and her heart sank when she considered the prospect of endless days or even weeks of his disapproval.

It took all her strength of will not to sink back into a state of abject gloom, but instead she made a determined attempt to be cheerful, no matter what he did. 'I had an offer to hitch-hike while I was waiting for you to come for me,' she told Aunt Celia, and the older woman raised elegant brows in comment.

'I hope you wouldn't have accepted,' she said. 'Even if I *hadn't* been on my way to fetch you, it's far too chancy a pastime, dear, especially for a pretty girl on her own.'

Alison laughed, although she was well aware that it sounded forced and Stefano was taking no part at all in the conversation but simply getting on with his meal in silence. 'I certainly wouldn't have gone with this particular driver,' she told her aunt. 'He was a very recognisable type—so obvious one could almost feel sorry for him.'

'Oh, I think I know the type. Face too red, suit too shiny and far too much after-shave,' Aunt Celia summed up accurately. 'I know the type. Usually between thirty-five and fifty, and desperately afraid of losing what little appeal they ever had.'

'That's it, exactly,' Alison agreed.

'I understand what you mean about feeling sorry for them,' her aunt mused. 'It *is* rather pathetic the way they imagine no woman can resist them.'

'I never fancy hitch-hiking, somehow,' Alison said. 'Danny says that girls who hitch-hike ask for all they get, and I think I'd go along with that to a



certain extent.'

She was aware suddenly that Stefano's black eyes were fixed on her and one black brow arched in a comment that said more than any words could have done. 'That is not only confined to girls who hitch-hike,' he remarked coolly, and Alison felt the colour flood into her face as she looked at him with wide, reproachful eyes. Only he was no longer looking at her but was giving his attention to his meal again.

'I suppose you and Danny will be naming the day any time now?' Aunt Celia asked, so suddenly and unexpectedly that Alison glanced at her uncomprehendingly for a moment, then she shook her head, her eyes darting a swift, almost panicky look at Stefano again, wondering if he realised that she had told her aunt about his agreeing to let her have the money.

'I—I suppose so,' she said. 'We—we haven't really thought too far ahead yet. Everything's been so—well, uncertain, and we've rather left things *in* the air as far as an actual date's concerned.'

'Well, at least he can buy his garage now, can't he?' her aunt went on, apparently blithely unaware of having said anything untoward.

'Yes. Yes, I suppose he can,' Alison agreed uncertainly.

Aunt Celia looked up again, glancing from Alison to Stefano with an assumed naiveté that deceived no one. 'Oh dear,' she said, 'I didn't get hold of the wrong end of the stick, did I?' No one spoke and she looked at Stefano enquiringly. 'You *have* given Alison the money, haven't you?' she asked.

have told her she can have the money,' Stefano

agreed quietly. 'Since she was prepared to go to such lengths to get it.'

Alison looked at him reproachfully again, and she would probably have protested, but Aunt Celia gave her no time. 'Oh, we girls will go to almost any lengths to get our own way,' she informed him, with quite appalling coyness. 'Won't we, Alison?'

'Almost,' Alison agreed, swallowing hastily and keeping her eyes lowered.

'Didn't you realise that, Stefano?' Aunt Celia asked. 'Of course,' she added brightly, 'we don't always mean *exactly* what we imply, but usually by the time our—victims realise that, it's too late anyway and they've already committed themselves, just the way we planned.'

There was silence for several minutes, the most awful silence Alison had ever sat through, and she would have given anything to have been able to run from the room or sink through the floor. Then she realised with a start, that Stefano was smiling. A small, tight smile to begin with that gradually widened as he looked at Aunt Celia.

'Celia,' he said quietly, 'you are a very—what is it? *Femmina astuzia*.'

Aunt Celia looked at him blandly. 'I haven't the remotest idea what that means,' she told him, 'but it sounds terribly impolite.'

'It is not,' he denied, apparently prepared to unbend, to her at least. 'It means—crafty, no cunning. You are a cunning woman to have been so—frank.'

'I only told you the truth,' Aunt Celia insisted. 'Although I'm not at all sure I should have let you in on one of womankind's best kept secrets.' She

looked across at Alison and smiled. 'Should I, darling?'

Alison kept her hands round her coffee cup. It prevented them from trembling and it was better than clasping them together like hands in prayer. 'I—I don't suppose it will make any difference,' she said flatly.

She started almost visibly when strong brown fingers closed over her right arm, and raised her eyes to look at Stefano. 'It could,' he said softly, and she hastily looked down again before she spoke.

'I'm sorry,' was all she said.

Danny stared at her in disbelief for several seconds when Alison broke the news to him that evening. Then his light blue eyes gleamed with excitement, and he hugged her close. 'Darling! Are you telling me that he's actually agreed? He's giving us the money?'

'He's authorising it from the trust,' Alison corrected him. 'It isn't actually his to give, Danny.'

'No, no, I know that.' He waved aside such -fine points with an impatient hand. 'When? When can I—we have it, darling? Soon?'

'I—I don't know for sure,' she said, wishing she could feel some of his excitement herself. 'It may take a little time to get so much. I suppose Stefano just has to authorise the amount and then—it's yours—ours.'

'It's marvellous!' He hugged her again, and kissed her forehead. 'You're a clever girl,' he told her. 'I'll go over to that place just outside Skegga and tell him I'll take it.' He rubbed his hands to-

gether gleefully. 'Now I can *really* get down to business.'

The fact that it also meant they could now get married seemed to have escaped him for the moment, and Alison did not feel inclined to remind him, although with her next words she did so inadvertently. 'When are you coming to Creggan Bar for dinner?' she asked him, and he stared at her for a moment as if he had forgotten ever having accepted the invitation. As, she thought ruefully, he probably had. The garage was the be-all and end-all of his ambitions and she almost resigned herself to taking second place to it already.

'Oh, yes.' His enthusiasm for that was much less. 'I'd forgotten about that.'

She smiled wryly. 'Yes, I thought perhaps you had. Well, now I've reminded you, and in the circumstances I think it would be as well to make it soon.'

He shrugged uneasily. 'Yes. Yes, **it would, I** suppose.'

'Tomorrow night?' *she* asked, and thought for a moment that he was going to argue, but he was still feeling elated about the prospect of owning his own garage after all, and he nodded.

'OK—tomorrow,' he agreed, and Alison thought, as she listened to him making plans, that he had not even been interested enough to ask her *how* she had achieved her success at last.

If Danny professed to being nervous at the idea of dining at Creggan Bar, Alison felt just as apprehensive at his coming. Aunt Celia had said she liked

Danny, but there were times when Alison doubted it, and she could not for one minute imagine him having much in common with Stefano. It could well be a very trying evening.

She took much more time than usual trying to decide which dress to wear, putting on first one and then another, finally settling for a little pale lemon one with no sleeves and a full skirt that made her look rather childlike and very appealing. She dare not wear anything too formal for fear of upsetting Danny, and she hoped Aunt Celia would take his more down-to-earth tastes into account too.

She left her bedroom at the same moment Stefano left his, and he looked at her and smiled, approvingly, she thought. 'This is a big night for you, is it not, Alison?' he asked, walking along with her to the head of the stairs, and she was not quite sure how she should answer that.

'I—I yes, I suppose it is,' she said.

Going down the stairs he was obliged to walk much closer to her and she was heart-stoppingly conscious of his fingers brushing against her bare arm. He looked very attractive and quite devastatingly self-confident, his black hair just touching the collar of a light blue shirt, and there was a glint of devilment in the black eyes when she met his gaze. She thought of Danny's rather acid remark about the cost of his suits and guessed he would turn green with envy when he saw the dark grey, beautifully cut one he wore tonight.

'Stefano !'

They were at the foot of the stairs and she put a hand on his arm, bringing them both to a halt. He

turned and looked down at her, seeming so much taller now that they were on the level, his dark, Mephistophelean features emphasised by the overhead lighting in the hall. There was always a light in the hall, even on summer evenings, because it was always a dim, cool place and for a moment she hesitated to go on, feeling suddenly shivery for no good reason that she could think of.

He put out a hand and touched her cheek gently with the tips of his fingers. 'What is troubling you, Alison?' he asked. He had never called her any of those half teasing but beautiful-sounding Italian endearments since they returned from Crag's Head, and she had to admit to being sorry about it.

'It's—it's about Danny,' she began, and wondered how on earth she could go on, without sounding horribly disloyal to Danny.

'You are afraid he will not like us—Celia and me, I mean,' he explained.

'He knows Aunt Celia.'

'Oh, I see.' He grimaced ruefully. 'It is me—you think he will dislike me, is that it?'

'Not really.' It was really very difficult to explain, and she fervently wished she had never broached the subject. She took a deep breath and tried again. 'It's just that Danny is—is different from you. I mean,' she added hastily, 'he comes from a quite different background and he sometimes—well, he resents people who are different from himself.'

'I see.' He said it softly and she was unsure what his reaction was, or how he had interpreted her explanation, but it was too late to do anything about it now because the front door bell was already

summoning her, and she called out to Mrs. Dawlish as she hurried over to answer it.

Danny was wearing his one and only suit, and she was thankful to see that he was even wearing a tie. He looked scrubbed and pink-faced and slightly resentful, as she had half expected, and he made no attempt to kiss her when she asked him in. 'I nearly didn't come at the last minute,' he told her, stroking nervously at his beard.

'Oh, Danny, you didn't!' She was unsure whether to laugh or take him seriously, then she decided he was quite serious about it and looked at him in dismay. 'But why?' she asked.

He looked around the big hall, at the paintings on the walls and the old but valuable rugs underfoot, and shrugged. 'This isn't my scene, Alison, you know that.'

'But that's silly,' she protested, fearing he might yet turn and walk out again.

'It's not silly,' he retorted sharply, so that she looked round hastily, to make sure that Stefano had gone into the dining room and was out of earshot. 'I just don't fit into a place like this, Alison, you know that as well as I do.' He smiled at her grimly. 'You can't make a silk purse' out of this particular sow's ear, darling, no matter how much you want to.'

'I don't want to make you into anything other than what you are,' she protested, thinking that quarrelling in the hall within minutes of his arrival was hardly a good start to an evening that promised to be fraught with pitfalls anyway. If Danny had made up his mind to be on the defensive it was

going to be very hard indeed to put him at ease.

He kissed her with his usual rather off-hand carelessness and laughed shortly. 'I bet you'd change me if you could, my sweet,' he told her. 'But I prefer to be what you look on as a misfit.'

'Oh, Danny!' She looked at him in despair. 'I don't know *why* you say things like that! You had the same upbringing I had, and you fit in here just as well as I do—or you would, if you weren't so bent on being—being difficult!'

'Difficult?' He looked at her speculatively. 'If I'm going to make it difficult for you, darling, shall I go?' He half turned, as if he meant to carry out his threat, and she clutched at his arm hastily.

'No! No, of course you won't go,' she told him. 'Besides, Stefano knows you're here now, you *must* come in.'

She took him across the hall and into the dining room, her heart doing crazy and alarming things when she thought of him meeting Stefano at last, and remembering his often expressed opinion of him. She opened the door and took a deep, almost audible breath as she introduced the two of them.

Danny eyed the older man as they shook hands, and there was some deep, glinting resentment in his light blue eyes, but he was quite formally polite, acknowledging Aunt Celia with a greeting that was much warmer, though still a little resentful. At least the first few minutes had gone off well, Alison thought, and heaved a sigh of relief while Stefano rang the bell for Mrs. Dawlish to bring in dinner.

It was not an easy meal, but thanks largely to Aunt Celia and Stefano it went off very well in the



circumstances, and Alison breathed a sigh of relief as they sat over coffee, for the moment quite relaxed.

'Well, Aunt Celia said brightly, smiling from Alison to Danny, 'this has been something of a celebration dinner, hasn't it?'

'Yes. Yes, I suppose it has,' Alison agreed a little warily.

She and Danny had discussed the garage plans at length, but nothing had been mentioned of their getting married, and she was wondering how he would respond to the assumption that the dinner was by way of being an engagement celebration. He would probably resent it in the way he did most things that he had not thought of himself.

'Are *you* celebrating something, Mrs. Friston?' Danny asked, one brow raised curiously, and Alison held her breath when she recognised the signs she had half expected.

Aunt Celia looked vaguely uneasy, as if she only now realised she had been a little unwise to be so open about something he obviously felt was his own private business. 'I *will* have my own celebration before very long,' she told him quietly. 'But it's a little premature for that yet, Danny. I was thinking more of you and Alison naming the day at last.'

Danny looked at her steadily for a moment, then he flicked a brief and querying glance at Alison before giving his whole attention to his coffee again. 'I don't think we've even discussed it yet,' he told her bluntly. 'There's no particular hurry that I'm aware of.'

Aunt Celia looked momentarily taken aback, but

she managed to smile as she looked from one to the other of them. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I must have got the wrong impression. I thought it was only the lack of funds that was holding up the proceedings, and that's been taken care of now, hasn't it?'

'That was holding up the business of buying the garage we want,' Danny informed her. 'It'll still hold up the purchase if the money's too long in coming through. That one on the Leethorpe road is too good to miss, and the man won't hold it for ever.' He looked at Stefano as he spoke, his meaning obvious, but Stefano was not to be so easily swayed, however broad the hints.

'It takes time,' he told him quietly. 'And as you say, there is no particular hurry.'

'There is for the garage,' Danny insisted. 'There's no time to hang about with that, or it'll be gone, and I especially want that one.'

He would, Alison thought ruefully; it was by far the most expensive one he had found so far and he had set his heart on that particular one. 'But, Danny—' she began, but might not have spoken for all the notice he took of her.

'The sooner I can get my money down, the better,' he told Stefano.

'Put down your money?' Stefano asked quietly, and Danny did not see the pitfall until it was too late—he nodded. 'You have some money to put down?' Stefano's voice was so quiet it sounded gentle, but it was as hard as steel, Alison realised with dismay. Danny had said the wrong thing by referring to it as his money, and she wondered what on earth had possessed him to be so tactless.

'All right, Alison's money,' he said harshly. 'It amounts to the same thing.'

'Only if you marry,' Stefano reminded him softly, and Danny scowled at him belligerently.

'We'll marry when we're good and ready,' he said. 'At the moment there are more pressing matters to consider.'

'Ah yes, the garage.'

'The garage,' Danny agreed, a faint sneer curling his top lip, so that Alison looked at him in dismay. If he quarrelled with Stefano now, it could ruin everything for him.

'Danny—' She put out a hand across the table to touch his arm, but he shook it off impatiently.

'I don't see that it's anybody else's business when we get married,' he said, to no one in particular. 'Even if we don't get married at all.'

She saw her aunt's head come up. sharply, and Stefano's black eyes narrowed. 'I wouldn't like to think you meant that, Danny,' Aunt Celia said quietly.

'I don't see what it has to *do* with you,' Danny told her bluntly. 'If Alison's prepared to stay as we are, or come to some other arrangement, I don't *see* that it concerns anyone else.'

Stefano was watching her suddenly, and she felt as if she would like nothing better than to sink through the floor. Coming so soon after her own provocative behaviour with him, it was inevitable what impression he would get.

'It concerns her family,' he told Danny quietly—too quietly, but only Alison realised that.

Danny smiled. 'Well, I don't happen to subscribe

to the school of thought that lives by somebody else's rules and regulations,' he said. 'If we want to skip the formalities, I don't see there's much anybody can do about it.'

'Do you not?'

Then Danny got the message, and he stared at Stefano for a moment in disbelief before his face flushed red with anger. 'You told her she could have the damned money,' he declared. 'You're not the type to go back on your word. I know your sort!'

'I think not,' Stefano told him softly. 'Any more than I think you know Alison very well.' The black eyes, deep and unfathomable, turned on her, and she felt like crying when she realised how he was fighting for her. For what he thought she really wanted—marriage to Danny. 'Is that what you want, Alison?' he asked softly. 'To—to live—as he says?'

She felt too numb for a moment to answer him. She had never before seen Danny in such a mood, never realised quite how bitterly he resented the orthodox things like marriage and the kind of life she was used to. All the old-fashioned things he so often jeered at were, she realised with a cold heart, exactly the kind of things she had cherished the thought of for the two of them. Danny would never change, no matter how he had professed to love her. If anyone changed at all it would have to be her, and she did not think she could adjust to his way of thinking any more than he could to hers.

She shook her head slowly. 'I—I don't,' she said, in a flat voice that betrayed how cold and hopeless she was feeling, and it was Stefano's strong fingers

that reached across and consoled her silently, while Danny looked across at her with a gleam of determination in his light blue eyes.

'You don't mean that, darling,' he told her, but his confidence had taken a blow and he knew it was touch and go whether he saw his cherished dream slip away or not. 'We'll *be* married, if that's what you want.'

She looked at him, seeing him for the first time, she thought bitterly. 'It was what I wanted, Danny,' she said in a small, tight voice.

'Was?'

She shook her head slowly. 'I don't think—I don't think I was seeing straight,' she said huskily. 'I'm sorry, Danny.'

'Alison!' He looked at the two other people at the table and got to his feet abruptly. 'Come outside and talk to me,' he told her sharply. 'For God's sake let's go somewhere we can talk about this without being watched over.'

He held out a hand to her, and she looked at Aunt Celia before she got up, much more slowly, from the table. 'If you'll excuse me,' she said, and Aunt Celia nodded, her eyes gentle with understanding. Before she turned to follow Danny from the room, Alison saw her put a restraining hand on Stefano's arm, and she bit hard on her lower lip. Aunt Celia, it seemed, was far more likely to have a happy ending than she was herself, if that brief but revealing answer to Danny's question about a celebration was anything to go by. And it was the surprisingly bitter thought of Stefano and her aunt that was uppermost in her mind as she went out to

find Danny.

He was waiting for her impatiently at the front of the house, having left the front door open behind him, as if he was quite sure she would follow him. He had lit a cigarette and was leaned up against the stone support at one side of the porch, much as he usually did against the stone bollard on the sea wall, the red glow of the tobacco fluctuating erratically as he drew smoke deep into his lungs.

He turned when she came out, and without a word, flung away the cigarette and pulled her into his arms and sought her mouth, roughly, almost savagely, taking no heed of her muffled protests as she fought for breath. He held her hair in his fingers and his grip was tight enough to hurt so that she struggled to escape for more than the obvious reasons.

'Danny I ' She struggled to free herself, but he hung on grimly to her arms.

'I won't argue with you,' he told her harshly. 'You've got to listen to me, Alison, you've got to! '

'I've listened,' she cried despairingly. 'It's no good, Danny: And please let me go, you're hurting me!'

He shook her hard, ignoring her cry of protest. 'You've listened to everybody *but* me,' he told her. 'They've got you thinking their way, they've—they've brainwashed you until you can't see straight.'

'No! No, they haven't!'

'You never bothered about conventional claptrap before,' he insisted, his light blue eyes gleaming too brightly in the light from the hall. 'Now all of a

sudden you behave as if marriage is the be-all and end-all of your existence.'

'You never *asked* my opinion,' she told him bitterly. 'You were so busy planning your garage, you never gave my feelings a thought.'

He looked down at her for a moment in silence, and she could feel the tense strength in his fingers where he held her, then he released her arms suddenly and took her hand, drawing her down the garden after him, towards the gate, not saying a word until they stood under **the tall, shadowy trees in the driveway. He pulled her round to face him again and looked down at her with an expression in his eyes that she had never seen before.**

**'I love you,' he said harshly. 'No matter what that—that foreign beggar thinks, I love you, and I'll marry you if that's what you want. Only I'm damned if I'll be dictated to by him or anybody else.'**

**'Danny, please! '**

He held her away from him for a moment, his eyes hard and implacable in the evening light. 'You might have known the sparks would fly if I got near *him*,' he told her, not *even listening* to her. 'I can't stand that sort I '

**'Danny I '**

He looked down at her for a moment, and she thought he was at last prepared to listen to her, but then he pulled her close again instead and kissed her in that same chillingly determined way. 'You *will* marry me, won't you, darling?' he said. 'You went to all that trouble to inveigle the money out of Mari, you wouldn't throw everything away now,

would you?

*'The money!'* She looked at him angrily. Her

blue eyes shining with scorn for his obvious concern about the money. 'That was always the prime object as far as you were concerned, wasn't it, Danny?'

He said nothing for a moment, then he smiled. A tight, rather cruel smile that curled his lips under the light beard. 'You're talking through your hat, darling.'

'No. No, I'm not.' She eased herself free of him and he let her go without a struggle, watching her with that same rather disdainful look in his eyes that he always had whenever he referred to 'that sort'. 'Do you really love me, Danny?' She asked the question as if she already knew the answer only too well, but Danny was not prepared to be so easily sidetracked.

He sighed and stood just behind her, his breath stirring the hair at the nape of her neck as he spoke. 'I *am* going to marry you, darling.'

Alison turned and looked up at him. 'Are you?' she asked. 'Or do you really expect me to—to——'

'Live in sin?' he jeered. 'Be your age, darling. You must have given it some thought, just as I have.'

'No, I *haven't!*'

'O.K., **O.K.!** So it's wedding bells and all the trimmings. *I* don't care one way or the other.'

It was something she detected in his voice that confirmed it for her and she looked at him with eyes that reflected her disillusion. 'Just as you don't care for me one way or the other,' she said. 'Just as long



as you get the money. That's it, isn't it, Danny?' She gave him no time to answer, but shook her head. 'Well, I'm sorry, Danny, but I can't.'

'What do you mean, you can't?'

'I can't marry you or—anything else.'

He said nothing for a moment or two, then he shook his head, 'So everything I—we planned for comes to nothing, is that it? You've let yourself be talked out of it by that—that damned Italian gigolo in there.'

Alison flushed, her eyes blazing furiously as she faced him with her hands clenched tightly at her sides. 'That's a filthy thing to say, Danny, and quite untrue! At least Stefano makes his own living, he doesn't just—just *use* people to get what he wants. He doesn't see them as no more than a—a means to an end, as you did me.'

'How very touching,' Danny jeered. 'You defend him 'as if you ' The light blue eyes gleamed maliciously at her. 'Now isn't that a pity?' he jibed, soft-voiced. 'And you can't have him, can you? Because he belongs to Auntie '

She had not meant to hit him quite so hard, but he staggered back against a tree and stood for a moment with one hand to his stinging cheek, then he raised a hand as if he would strike her, only something caught his eye and he hastily lowered it again, deciding that withdrawal was the most strategic move. He turned and, without a word, hurried off through the gates and along the road, out of sight.

Alison stared after him for a moment, startled by his sudden departure, then she heard what Danny

had seen. Stefano was just behind her and she could not be sure how much of Danny's taunts he had heard. Coming so soon after, she could not face him, and she shook her head dazedly before running as fast as her legs would carry her, past him, then round through the trees and into the house.

## CHAPTER NINE

EVEN though she had expected it to be a little nerve-racking, Alison had not anticipated that dinner the previous evening would eventually turn out to be quite so disastrous, or end so abruptly, with everything over between herself and Danny.

And it *was* all over between them, she had no illusions about that; indeed it was almost a relief, and she was not really so surprised to find that the idea of no longer being engaged to Danny did not dismay her nearly so much as she would once have expected. She pondered on that particular aspect of the outcome as she lay in bed the following morning, watching the sun's yellow finger slide slowly round her bedroom wall, through a gap in the curtains.

Perhaps she should have felt more regretful about his going, but instead she felt relief, especially when she considered that she had probably escaped a lifetime of being a combined housewife and mechanic.

The night before she had been much too upset and far too embarrassed to face the rest of the evening in the company of her aunt and Stefano. The prospect of questions and probably a suggestion of I-told-you-so from Stefano had been enough to deter her from wanting anyone's company, so she had merely given Aunt Celia a brief, breathless and rather vague explanation before disappearing has-

tilly upstairs to her room before Stefano returned to the house.

She could stand neither his sympathy, if he was inclined to offer it, nor any less kindly reaction from him in the circumstances. She dreaded to think how much of that cruel, spiteful jibe he had overheard, and she had wanted to avoid any mention of that last night, at all costs.

It was not going to be easy facing him, *even* this morning, but at least she had had time to recover something of her pride and self-possession, and she was determined not to mope about looking sorry for herself. She should, she realised too, be glad that she had been shown Danny in his true colours at last, and before it was too late.

If she had any regrets at all, it was because Danny had come so close to achieving his life's ambition, only to see it vanish at the last minute and, ironically, thanks to his own rash behaviour. She doubted very much if he would ever have his garage now, and she could not help feeling sorry about that, wondering for a moment if Stefano would consider letting him borrow the money. On a strictly business footing, of course, but it would to some extent help to salve her conscience and make her feel a little better about it. No matter if the fault was entirely his own.

There was another matter to consider too, she remembered, something far more disturbing to her peace of mind. Aunt Celia had not mentioned specifically what her own cause for celebration was to be, but it did not take much effort on Alison's part to guess, and the idea made her much more

inclined to be tearful than the departure of Danny had done.

He had made that unforgivable jibe about Stefano belonging to her aunt, and it seemed he was right. Nevertheless it had incited her to hit him, and she still felt a strange kind of savage fury when she thought of it, although heaven knew what interpretation Danny, and Stefano himself, had put on her reaction.

A gentle, tentative tap on her bedroom door jolted her back to earth, and she called out for whoever it was to come in, half expecting that it would be her aunt. As she anticipated, Aunt Celia's neat brown head appeared round the edge of the door, the rest of her following when she saw that she was awake.

'I've brought you some tea, darling,' she told her, sitting herself on the edge of the bed, and Alison noticed how bright and fresh she looked, despite last night's disastrous episode. Her grey eyes did, however, betray both anxiety and curiosity and she seemed, if anything, a little wary and careful of choosing her words. 'I wasn't sure how you'd be feeling this morning,' she ventured, and Alison shrugged, smiling and pulling a face as she sat up to take her tea.

'Oh, I'm all right, Aunt Celia, thanks,' she said.

'Are you sure?' She sounded very anxious about it, and Alison smiled again to reassure her.

'Quite sure,' she said. 'I'm fine, honestly.'

'I'm glad.' A hand covered one of hers and the kindness of the gesture almost shattered her composure. It was quite ridiculous to feel so tearful

when Aunt Celia was going to be so happy, but there was nothing she could do about it, and she wished fervently that she could simply pack up and go without saying a word to anybody. 'I—we had an awful feeling that we might—well, that we might have been responsible for you and Danny fighting last night,' Aunt Celia went on.

We—Alison noticed, and once again swallowed hastily on the threat of tears. 'It's finished, Aunt Celia,' she told her. 'Danny and me—it's all over.'

'For good?' Alison nodded. 'Oh, darling, I'm so sorry.' Again the comforting hands consoled her. 'I know how you must feel.'

Alison shook her head. 'I don't feel anything much, in fact,' she said. 'I don't—I mean I never did love him, you know. Not really love him the way—' She stopped hastily there and looked down at her tea rapidly getting cold while she talked. 'I suppose Danny was really just somebody I was used to,' she went on, half talking to herself. 'I—I blinded myself to what he was really like because I'd known him for so long and he was part of—of the old days.' She shrugged. 'Anyway,' she said, 'it's over.'

Aunt Celia would understand, she thought, because she had never really liked him, despite her protestations that she did, and she was probably very relieved not to have him in the family, especially in view of her own plans with Stefano.

That was what was concerning her most at the moment, Alison thought. What would happen to her own plans? If Alison's being a free agent again would affect them. If she was planning to marry

Stefano she would probably wonder what Alison's reaction would be to being an interloper in what was half her own house.

It would not be possible, of course, for her to stay on at Creggan Bar, it did not even bear thinking about, but she wondered just what on earth *she would* do. Perhaps after all it would be she who would emigrate to Australia instead of Danny.

'I expect you're bound to feel a bit upset about it for a while,' Aunt Celia told her, bringing her back to earth again. 'But I'm glad you realise it's for the best, Alison dear.'

'Oh, I do,' Alison assured her, sipping her tea thoughtfully. She sighed then. 'Poor Danny, he really, wanted that garage, you know, Aunt Celia, and I can't help feeling a bit guilty about it—after all, I *did* promise him the money.'

'He was a disgusting little mercenary,' Aunt Celia told her tartly, 'and you're well rid of him. Stefano agrees with me too.'

'Yes, he would,' Alison said resignedly. 'I've no doubt he's delighted to have been proved right, yet again.'

'Alison dear!'

Alison looked uneasy, her hands trembling as she put down her cup on the bedside table. 'I'm—I'm sorry,' she apologised. 'I shouldn't have said that.'

'It wasn't very fair, darling.'

'No, I know, and I really am sorry.'

'Oh well, you don't have to apologise to me about it,' her aunt told her with a smile. 'What are you going to do now?'

'I don't know.' She hugged her knees up under

her chin and gazed thoughtfully at the far wall. 'I think I might emigrate.'

'Oh no, Alison!' Aunt Celia looked at her doubtfully, not quite sure how serious she was about it. 'You don't mean it, do you?'

'Why not?' Alison asked. 'It seems like a good idea, and it *would* solve quite a lot of problems, wouldn't it?'

'None that I can think of,' her aunt told her frankly. 'And I don't believe you really mean it, darling. Haven't you someone else to take your mind off it? Danny can't have been the only man in your life, surely?'

There was an implication there somewhere, Alison felt, but she could not quite imagine what it was, and she shook her head firmly. 'I'm not thinking about men ever again,' she assured her aunt seriously, and Aunt Celia shook her head and frowned.

'I don't believe that either,' she said. 'Are you sure there isn't someone else?'

'Quite sure.' The answer was adamant.

'Oh!

Alison eyed her curiously. 'You sound as if you rather wish there was,' she told her, puzzled and a little irritated by her insistence.

Aunt Celia smiled again, a rather suggestive smile that puzzled Alison still more. 'I do,' she said, and Alison stared at her for a moment, too stunned to reply, then she shook her head slowly.

'I don't think I understand you, Aunt Celia,' she said. 'I don't see why you're so—so anxious to see me—married off.'



'I'm not exactly anxious to see you married off,' her aunt corrected her carefully. 'But there are two reasons why I'd rather like to see you—well, at least on the way to settling down with someone, other than Danny, of course. One is simply that I'd like to see you safely settled before I—' Her slim hands fluttered delicately to emphasise her meaning. 'I have my own plans, you see,' she explained, slowly, as if she sought the right words.

'Yes, yes, I realise that.' Alison felt suddenly as if a cold, heavy weight had settled in the region of her heart when she thought of the fact actually being announced aloud, so that there was no longer any speculation or doubt about it, and even with the best effort she could muster, she could not feel as delighted as she would like to have been.

She was very fond of Aunt Celia, and she would have loved nothing better than to see her find happiness again after so long as a widow—but she could not face the fact that it was Stefano who would be sharing her happiness, and the rest of her life with her.

'I'm—I'm very pleased for you, Aunt Celia,' she said, and thought her voice sounded tight and hoarse, not like her own at all. 'I—I hope you'll be very happy.'

'Darling—' her aunt began, but Alison silenced her with a sudden and over-enthusiastic kiss.

'I'm *very* happy for you,' she insisted, smiling and determinedly cheerful, only wishing she could do something about the tears that gathered in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. 'I—I hope you'll have all the happiness in the world,' she said, and

sobbed heartbreakingly while Aunt Celia put comforting arms round her and hugged her close, as if she was a child.

'Alison Darling! ' She rocked her, babylike, while Alison hid her head against her shoulder, praying she would not guess the cause of her tears. 'Oh, I shouldn't have been so thoughtless,' her aunt said contritely. 'Please forgive me, dear, I should have, known you'd be upset over Danny, no matter if you did— Oh, my dear, I'm sorry. Don't cry, baby, please 1 '

'I—I didn't want to,' Alison sobbed. 'It's—it's r-r-ridiculous and I'm s-s-sorry, I'm sorry '

'Darling, you don't have to be sorry,' Aunt Celia consoled her, her hands smoothing back the hair from her forehead. 'Now stop crying, my dear, or Stefano will think you're really in love with your Danny after all and next thing you know he'll be haring off down to the village to fetch him back for you.'

'Oh no, he wouldn't ' She looked up and was surprised to see her aunt quite serious.

'He would if he thought that was what you wanted,' she assured her. 'Now dry your eyes, because you don't really want Danny back, do you?'

Alison shook her head, her mind racing wildly over the possibility of Stefano forcing Danny to come back to her, and feeling a strange desire to giggle suddenly when she considered the possibilities of such an encounter. 'I—I don't want him back,' she said, 'even if he'd come.'

Her aunt looked at her steadily for a moment, her eyes showing a trace of apprehension, as if she

feared she might change her mind. 'Oh, he'd come,' she told her. 'Have no fear about that.'

'Yes,' Alison sighed. 'Yes, I suppose he would.'

Aunt Celia got up from the bed suddenly, and lifted her chin with one hand, smiling down at her. 'You have your bath and dress, darling,' she told her, 'and maybe Stefano will take you for a run in the boat, after breakfast.'

*When she thought her mind formed over her*

swift refusal, but she was smiling when she turned in the doorway.

'See how you feel,' she said, and went out of the room.

Stefano and Aunt Celia had almost finished their breakfasts when Alison came down for hers. She had delayed as long as possible in the hope that Stefano would have had his breakfast and gone, but they both looked up when she came in.

'Good morning.'

She addressed herself to Stefano, and he smiled at her with such gentleness and understanding that she found it harder than ever to contain the tears that still gave her eyes a misty look.

'Good morning, *piccola*,' he said softly, reverting to his favourite name for her, and producing another threat to her self-control. 'How are you this morning?'

'I'm—I'm all right, thank you.' She refused breakfast when it was offered, but had coffee and stirred it absently while she kept her eyes carefully lowered. It was even more difficult to face him than she had anticipated and she could not, no matter

how much she thought she should, congratulate him as she had Aunt Celia.

'I would like to—to apologise,' he said slowly and carefully, as if it was a new experience to him. 'I think perhaps I did something last night towards——'

'Please,' Alison interrupted hastily, shaking her head, 'I don't want to talk about last night.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It—it doesn't matter.'

There was silence for a few moments, a heavy, rather tense silence, then he turned to her again and smiled in a way that made her feel as if her head was spinning. 'It is a beautiful morning,' he told her. 'I thought perhaps you would like to come with me to the boat, huh? We could go for a ride, round as far as Heron's Point, if you would like to.'

'I—I don't think I will, thank you,' she told him, and sensed rather than saw the look he exchanged with her aunt.

'It would do you good to have a blow on the water, darling,' Aunt Celia told her gently. 'Why don't you go?'

She wished Aunt Celia, of all people, would not be so insistent, and the fingers holding her coffee cup showed white bones at the knuckles. 'I—I don't think I should,' she told her, sensing that both her aunt and Stefano were puzzled by her reason.

'But why on earth shouldn't you?' Aunt Celia asked, while Stefano's black eyes watched her with a gentle curiosity.

Alison sipped her coffee, wondering if she had ever felt more miserable in her life. 'I—I just don't

think I should, that's all,' she told her.

Those familiar, strong brown fingers reached out and curled round her hand gently. 'Don't you trust me, *amante mia?*' he asked softly, and she felt the colour flood into her cheeks betrayingly as her heart began a heavy, painful throbbing under her ribs, and she shook her head.

'Please don't—please don't question me,' she begged huskily. 'I don't want to come with you, Stefano. Please don't—don't ask me again.'

'Alison!' He said no more, but she knew without looking at him that he was more hurt than offended by her adamant refusal to go with him, and she wished she had worded it in some other way. She had not the slightest wish to hurt him—in fact she would have done anything rather than hurt him, but she could not tell him that, and it was impossible for her to go with him just as if nothing was different.

It did not come as a shock to her, for it was the only logical reason why she had been so unwilling to see him married to her aunt, but for the first time she faced the fact that she was in love with him. It was a love completely different from the one she had imagined she had for Danny, and it hurt like a physical pain when she thought of what it would do to her to see him happily married to Aunt Celia.

'Alison——'

That familiar and enchanting stress on the second syllable of her name was her undoing. 'Please—please will you excuse me?' she whispered as the tears poured down her cheeks again. 'I don't feel—' She hurried out of the room blindly, and

hesitated only briefly before going out of the back door and down the grassy slope to the headland.

She stood there for a few moments, poised on the very edge of the tall grey headland like a bird ready for instant flight, then she turned suddenly and walked quickly down the incline towards the beach, not really knowing where she was going, or caring, as long as it was away from the house and the situation she found unbearable.

The tide was on the turn and the ruffled edge of it flowed like cream lace over the yellow sand, inviting and gentle, so that she felt the same old urge to walk through it, barefoot. Almost without realising what she was doing, she bent and took off her sandals, the morning-cold water rippling over her feet, soft as silk and oddly soothing.

It did not matter very much where she was going, there was a whole length of beach with not a soul in sight, and she could go on for ever, or so she felt. The light wind lifted her hair from her neck and cooled her burning cheeks, so that she lifted her face to it, and closed her eyes as she walked.

She had walked back along the beach until she was now immediately below the tip of the headland, and instinctively she raised her head and looked up. The edge of the promontory with its fringe of feathery grass was outlined against the blue of the morning sky, not yet brassy with the full heat of day, and as she looked at it through hazy eyes, she saw someone appear at the very edge and look down at her.

A tall, dark figure that there was no mistaking and she felt her heart skip, almost in panic when

she thought of him coming after her. She could not bear the sympathy he was bound to show, nor the gentle, consoling arm round her shoulders, so she merely shook her head when he chanced disaster to lean over and signal to her that she should wait for him.

He disappeared, *even* as she turned her head, and she went walking on, faster now, so as to escape before he could gain the lower ground and catch her up. It would take him some time to come down the way she had come, but she seemed suddenly to be uncertain of her steps and once fell to her knees when she turned her head to see how much start she had.

'Alison!'

Hearing his voice behind her, almost whipped away by the wind, she stumbled again but refused to look back. She was breathing a little hard now and needed to slow down, but she did not want him to catch up with her. She would make a complete fool of herself, she knew, if he did, and she would not have him know how she felt, not for anything.

'Alison!'

He sounded so much nearer now and she just had to slow down, so that she was not surprised when he came up behind her and put his hands on her arms, bringing her to a halt, his own breathing warmly erratic against her face. 'Alison!'

She wanted nothing more than to turn to him, let him hold her in his arms, but she could not do that, not for both their sakes, so she struggled to evade him and managed to do so only because he had been caught unawares by her action.

'Why?' He spoke in that same hurt voice he had used at the house, and she felt the tears already starting in her eyes again. 'Why, *amante mia*? What have I done that is so bad you will **not even** look at me?'

'Stefano, please don't!

He turned her to face him then, his hands gentle but firm as he held her so that he could see the tears and the abject misery on her face. 'Oh, *carissima!*' he said softly, his black eyes unbelievably gentle as he looked at her. *Bella amante mia!* Why are you crying?'

feel—' She sought for reasons why she should feel so miserable, reasons she could tell him.

'You do not cry for that Danny, I know,' he told her. 'Celia told me that you had admitted you did not love him.'

'I—I didn't.'

'Then why, *cara mia*?'

'Because—' She could not find the words, no matter how she tried, and she could do nothing about it when he pulled her into his arms and held her close against him, his face in the disordered cloud of dark hair below his chin.

'Tell me,' he coaxed, and Alison closed her eyes for a moment on the exquisite torture of knowing she must not let this go on.

'I know—I know about Aunt Celia,' she said huskily, pushing against his hold, although he did not release her completely, and the black eyes looked vaguely puzzled by her words, she thought.

'I know too,' he told her. 'I am sure she will be very happy. But I do not understand, *amante*, what



this has to do with you being so unhappy. Do you not like to think that Celia is to be married again? That is *a* very selfish thing for you to feel, *piccola mia.*'

'Of course I don't mind her being married,' she told him. 'It's just that—that—oh, please! Don't question me! Let me go! ' She fought against his hold, but he refused to make escape easy for her, and pulled her close to him again, although he held her where he could still look down into her face and the tearful misery of her eyes.

He bent his head suddenly and kissed her eyes gently, before he sought her mouth. It was a kiss that lasted so long and was so warmly exciting that she found herself responding to it, forgetting about everything else but being in his arms and loving him as she had never believed possible.

His mouth was firm but gentle, and he kissed her throat and neck, whispering soft words that made no sense to her because they were in his own tongue, but they sounded sweet and beautiful and she closed her eyes, saying his name over and over again.

It was not until far too long afterwards that she remembered suddenly and pulled away from him, her eyes wide with dismay at what she had done. 'Oh no!' she said. 'No, Stefano, no!'

He looked at her, she thought, as if he would kiss her again and she pushed against him with both hands on his chest. 'What is the matter with you, *piccola?*' he asked.

'Aunt Celia!' she said, her huge blue eyes looking so contrite that he shook his head and smiled

wryly down at her. 'Oh, Stefano, how *could* you?'

He sighed deeply and with Latin exaggeration, his black eyes glinting with a mixture of laughter and impatience. 'I wish you would explain to me,' he told her in his precise English, 'what Celia has to do with *us*.'

'But—' She stared at him, a sudden and deliriously bright possibility dawning on her. 'Aunt Celia,' she said carefully, 'is getting married.'

He nodded, smiling. 'And so am I, I hope.'

Alison pushed at him again. 'Oh, you—you monster! You Bluebeard! How could you be such a—a callous, unfeeling, selfish——'

He silenced her very effectively and for quite a long time and when he allowed her to breathe again he lifted her chin with one hand and smiled down at her. 'Now I see why you are so concerned about your aunt,' he told her, and laughed, a deep, gleeful sound that throbbed against her as he pulled her close to him again.

'You have no right——' she began, but again he brought his mouth down on to hers and she felt no inclination at all to fight him.

'Have you not noticed,' *he* asked her several minutes later and when she had recovered sufficiently to realise what he was saying, 'that Celia has spent an awful lot of time at the dentist's lately?'

Alison frowned, failing at first to see what possible bearing that could have on anything. 'I don't see——' she began, then widened her dark-fringed eyes and stared at him. 'You mean ——'

He kissed the end of her nose lightly, and laughed. 'I mean, *amante*,' he told her, 'that your

aunt's dentist is a very good-looking man of about forty-five. Have you not seen him?'

Alison shook her head, still in a daze. 'No, I don't have the same one. But why didn't she *tell* me?'

He shrugged. 'I do not think she wanted to feel she was forcing you into Danny Clay's arms,' he told her. 'If you had known how things were for her, you would have wanted to leave her free of her—chaperone duties and you would probably have been in much more of a hurry to marry your garage man.'

Alison looked up at him reproachfully. 'You're being unkind,' she told him. 'And I would have been married to Danny by now, I expect, if you hadn't been such a Scrooge about my money.'

'I know you would have, *piccola*, that is why I did not let you have it, huh? I could not have you marrying that man with a car engine for a heart and who would have put you in overalls and kept your pretty nose inside an oily engine for the rest of your life. Besides,' he added with a wicked gleam in his black eyes, 'I wanted you for myself, and I knew you would come to me eventually if I could keep that little *meccanico* at bay.'

'You *wanted* me?' she questioned his choice of word with a raised brow and a disapproving pout.

'*Wanted* you,' he stressed, kissing the pout out of existence. 'I love you, *carissima*, that is what I mean. My English is not so good.'

'Your English is impeccable,' Alison retorted. 'And if I thought you meant——'

'I love you, *carissima, bella amante mia!*' He kissed her again for so long and so passionately that she

could not find enough breath to argue with him when he looked down at her with his black eyes laughing wickedly. 'You will marry me,' he said, and she just nodded, wondering vaguely what she had done with the sandals she had been carrying, not even noticing that they had long since drifted off with the ebbing tide.