



Mills & Boon

THE PRETTY WITCH

Lucy Gillen



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When Nigel Frome got Isobel Hendrix the job of secretary to his half-brother, Lucifer Bennetti, it was with the idea that he would thus be able to see a lot more of her.

But Lucifer resembled his satanic namesake in more ways than one; wasn't Nigel taking rather a risk?

CHAPTER ONE

ISOBEL glanced yet again at her watch and sighed despairingly. It was already five minutes past nine and still the hot, overcrowded bus had not reached her stop. If only she had thought to check how long the bus took to get to Green's Corner she could have caught an earlier one, but she had been advised to catch this particular one and twenty minutes had seemed plenty of time to cover the journey from Greenlaw.

It had seemed a much shorter distance when she had come for her interview a couple of weeks ago, but then of course she had been very extravagant and indulged in a taxi. The taxi had made little of the distance and none of the stops that the bus was required to make. Not that it wasn't a very pleasant journey, especially now, with the Gloucestershire countryside at its summery best, but she was not travelling to Green's Corner just for the pleasure of enjoying the scenery, but to take up a new position as secretary, and being late was not going to make a very good first impression.

Actually she had been rather more keen than usual to make a good impression, because she felt as if she had got the post more through influence than because her prospective employer had been impressed with her skill. Indeed he had seemed barely interested in such things as typing and shorthand speeds and had been very off-hand and casual with her for the very short time he saw her.

Although the interview had been so brief Isobel remembered it all too vividly and, not for the first time, wondered if she had made a mistake in changing her job so impulsively. Of course the pay was very much better than at Frome's and it should be quite exciting working for anyone as well known as Luke Bennett, although he had made her rather uneasy at their first meeting.

She had expected a famous writer of crime novels to be somewhat impressive, but he had been so much more than she expected. For one thing, he was so tall, and her own meagre five feet two had seemed even less than usual when he stood up to greet her. He had said little during the short time they were together, but she thought she would never forget those rather startling black eyes and the dark, disturbingly attractive features. He was so completely unlike Nigel that she had been unprepared for it and shown her surprise quite plainly, a fact which had appeared to amuse him.

Of course they were only half-brothers. Luke Bennett, or Lucifer Bennetti to give him his true name, had the same mother as Nigel, but his father, so Nigel had rather reluctantly informed her, was an Italian count, and their mother's first husband. Evidently the elder brother had inherited his looks entirely from his father, but Isobel had expected them to have at least one feature in common instead of being so completely different.

Nigel's brown hair and blue eyes and his regular features were in such contrast to his brother's black hair and eyes, and Nigel was at least a couple of inches shorter too. Thinking of Nigel, she pulled a wry face, remembering that it had been he who had persuaded her to apply for this job and no doubt, too, persuaded his brother that she was suitable for it. But now here she was at least five minutes late and getting later every minute, and on her first morning too.

Lateness was one thing Nigel would never tolerate, and she felt she was letting him down badly. She had been a little surprised at first when Nigel had suggested her leaving Frome's, where she had been ever since leaving secretarial college four years ago. Thinking of it later, however, his reason became clearer. Nigel had been away from the firm for some weeks now, and how much longer it was likely to be before he came back, she had no idea.

Several male members of the staff had made no secret of the fact that they found her very attractive, and only Nigel's presence had kept them from doing anything about it. With Nigel away things could be different and Isobel thought the idea was that Nigel should have her near him and also out of the way of temptation.

She sighed with more than relief when at last Green's Corner came into sight round another bend, and she was on her feet ready to alight well before the bus stopped, thanking heaven that the bus stop was only a couple of yards from the gates of Kanderby Lodge. The conductor gave her a smile as she passed him, attracted, as most men were, by her fairness and the lovely soft features that smiled easily.

Her thick corn-gold hair curled slightly and she wore it tied back with a brightly coloured scarf at the nape of her neck. A small anxious frown drew her brows together at the moment above huge, brown-fringed grey eyes. It was too warm for a topcoat, but her linen dress was neat and smart enough to please even the most fastidious employer, and a dark enough green to be considered suitable for a secretary about to take up a new post.

She remembered to turn right after she went through the double gates, because the lodge where Lucifer Bennetti lived and worked had been built in the ample grounds of Kanderby House, his grandmother's home. The garden was bright and colourful and smelled of the dark loam that lay in permanent shadow beneath the shrubs all along the drive and half hiding the lodge she sought.

She sent a swift, not very hopeful look along the drive to the bigger house immediately opposite the gates, wishing she could catch just a glimpse of Nigel before she faced what she expected to be an irate employer.

It was a faint hope, of course, for while he was still so incapacitated he would be unlikely to be up and about so early. A bad car crash

several weeks ago had put Nigel into hospital for some time and he was now staying with his grandmother, recovering slowly and chafing at the enforced inactivity.

Isobel crunched her way round the gravel drive to the front door of the cottage and hesitated briefly before knocking. She felt very small and scared and rather like a child starting school for the first time, as she waited for her knock to be answered. When no one came after several seconds, she knocked again and eyed the shiny brass knob speculatively. Perhaps the manservant who had admitted her last time was out or busy elsewhere and unable to hear her knock.

Her heart thumping uneasily, she turned the knob and pushed the door open a couple of inches. 'Hello!' Her voice sounded very quiet and horribly uncertain and she thought for a moment that the house must be empty, then a door to her right opened suddenly and curious eyes looked at her through the narrow opening.

'Judging by what I can see,' Lucifer Bennetti said, 'you're my new girl.' He came across the intervening few feet and opened the door wide while Isobel prepared an apology. 'Come on in.'

He left her to close the door behind her and went back into the room he had come from. Presuming she was intended to follow, Isobel walked in after him, remembering the bright sunny room from her last visit. 'I'm - I'm very sorry I'm so late,' she ventured, and he turned an unconcerned gaze on her, one black brow arched curiously.

'Are you? I hadn't noticed.'

Isobel blinked. Friendly as she was with Nigel he would, even so, have commented on her arrival some fifteen minutes late. 'It's a quarter past nine,' she informed him.

The black eyes studied her for a moment, then he smiled. A crooked, sardonic smile that glittered wickedly and made Isobel feel strangely

uneasy again. 'I hope you're not a clock-watcher,' he told her. 'I don't work to the clock. This isn't a nine-to-five job, I thought you realized that.'

'Oh, I do,' Isobel hastened to assure him. 'I was just apologizing for not starting on time, that's all.'

Again he studied her in silence for a while. 'I suppose you had to be on the dot with Nigel, didn't you?'

She nodded. 'Of course. In business you can't afford to be any other way.'

'Of course.' She thought she detected sarcasm in the reply, but gave him the benefit of the doubt.

She looked around her at the untidy shambles of paper and reference books, boxes of carbon, pieces of scribble-covered paper and a typewriter half-hidden by a tweed jacket thrown carelessly across it. 'What would you like me to do first?' she asked, and he too looked around the untidy room before cocking a brow at her.

'Is it beneath your secretarial dignity to tidy up?' he inquired, in such a way that she felt sure he expected her to refuse indignantly.

'No, of course not, Mr. Bennetti.'

He looked at her curiously. 'Oh, so Nigel's enlightened you now, has he?' He grinned at her and she was reminded uncomfortably of his satanic namesake. 'I'm surprised he let the cat out of the bag, he usually prefers to keep the fact quiet that there's Italian blood in the family. He heaved a sigh of relief when I decided to use Luke Bennett for a pen-name.'

Isobel put down her bag and gloves and prepared to tackle the marathon task of bringing some sort of order to the big room. 'I've

never heard him express any opinion about it either way,' she told him, 'so I think you must be wrong in that respect.'

That expressive brow shot upwards again and he eyed her curiously as he perched on the edge of another desk, presumably his own, over near the window. 'Are you on familiar enough terms with him for him *to* say anything, Miss Hendrix?' he asked in a suspiciously quiet voice, and Isobel glanced up only to lower her gaze again hastily when she met his eyes.

'I'm - I'm not sure I know what you mean, Mr. Ben-netti.'

A deep chuckle startled her, and she flicked him another wary glance. 'I mean, in fact,' he told her, 'are you Nigel's girl-friend?'

She stopped in her task for a moment, the discarded jacket in front of her, her gaze uncertain as she looked at him. 'I - yes, I suppose you could say that in a way,' she admitted.

'I thought so. He takes you out more than he does anyone else, doesn't he?'

Isobel nodded. 'We have been out together quite a lot, before his accident, of course.'

He was grinning again, the black eyes glittering wickedly. 'I thought it might be that,' he said. 'He seemed so anxious to have you here and he hinted that I should keep my beady eyes off you.'

'Oh, he shouldn't have done that,' Isobel protested, feeling more uneasy than ever at his frankness.

A quiet laugh greeted her protest and he got up and walked round to the other side of his desk. 'I don't imagine you mean that the way it sounds,' he told her.

'Anyway, my brother knows me a lot better than you do, and he doesn't approve of me in the least.'

'Then why did he want me—' she began, and he smiled.

'Better the devil you know,' he quoted softly, and laughed. 'And while you're here he can keep an eye on you, can't he?'

It was an uneasy truth that she was obliged to face and she nodded, but was unprepared to voice agreement. 'I don't think that's quite true,' she told him, and looked up sharply when he laughed again.

'You're very young,' he said bluntly, 'and rather naïve too, from the sound of it.'

'I'm--'

Her protest was cut short as if she had not even spoken. 'You look as if a good strong wind would blow you away,' he told her, and swept his black eyes over her small but attractive figure as he smiled. 'A real *fantoccia*. Nigel has excellent taste, I'll allow him that, but you look as if you'd be more at home with fairy-tales than with my blood and thunder epics. Will you be able to cope?'

'Quite well, thank you, Mr. Bennetti.'

His smile was a mere crooking of the wide straight mouth. 'I think you will too,' he told her.

Whether or not he always finished at the same time for lunch, Isobel had no way of knowing, but she was relieved that today he told her she could go at just before one o'clock. She had to admit that the morning had gone far more quickly than she realized and, once he

became absorbed in his work, he said little, so she finished tidying the room and then got on with a pile of typing that awaited her attention.

She was nervous too when she thought about lunch- time, because Nigel had asked her to come over to the house and have lunch with him and his grandmother. She had never met Mrs. Claudia Grayson, but she knew her to be an extremely wealthy woman and Isobel wondered if she would take kindly to having her grandson's employee as a luncheon guest.

'Are you going over to the house for lunch?' Lucifer Bennetti asked as she picked up her bag and gloves, and Isobel nodded.

'Yes. Nigel asked me to come.'

She looked at him, startled, when he put a hand under her arm and walked to the door with her. 'I'll act as escort,' he told her, with a grin for her surprise. 'Beppo's got the day off. My man,' he explained when she frowned curiously. 'When he's off I eat with the quality.'

Isobel realized for the first time that they must have been alone in the cottage by themselves all morning and, almost as if he guessed what she was thinking, he looked down at her and chuckled softly as he closed the door behind them. He really was the most disconcerting man, Isobel thought, and one she could very easily dislike.

He took her round the thick shrubbery at the back of the house and across a lawn to open french windows that led straight in to a long, sunny, beautifully furnished room. Their appearance gave rise to simultaneous cries of welcome from Nigel, resting uneasily in an armchair, and from a small and remarkably bright-eyed elderly woman.

'Lucifer dear, I'm *so* glad you remembered you were lunching with us today,' his grandmother told him as he bent to kiss her cheek.

'Of course I remembered, Grandmama, how could I forget?'

The old lady kissed him enthusiastically, obviously doting on her elder grandson, then her bright blue eyes peeped curiously round his broad shoulders to Isobel. 'And this must be the young lady I've heard so much about. Do introduce us, one of you.'

Nigel, unable to leave his chair very easily, found himself forestalled, and Isobel saw the frown that condemned his brother's action. 'Grandmama, this is Isobel Hendrix. Miss Hendrix, my grandmother, Mrs. Grayson.'

The blue eyes studied her for a moment in friendly curiosity while she still held her hand, then she smiled. 'I'm delighted to meet you, my dear. I've heard a great deal about you from Nigel.'

Isobel glanced at Nigel, relieved at her reception. 'It was very kind of you to ask me to lunch, Mrs. Grayson, thank you.'

The old lady looked at Nigel, her eyes twinkling. 'I just had to meet you after hearing so much lavish praise to your prettiness,' she told Isobel. 'And he's quite right, you're a very lovely girl, Miss Hendrix.'

'A teal little *fantoccia*, eh, Grandmama?' Lucifer said softly, and the old lady shook her head in mild reproach.

'Lucifer, it may be a compliment to call a young lady a doll, but I feel it's not very polite at this stage of your relationship.' She looked at Isobel, seeking understanding, while Nigel frowned blackly in the background. 'How have you been getting along with my scoundrel of a grandson, Miss Hendrix?'

'Oh — very well, thank you, Mrs. Grayson.' She flicked a glance at Nigel and smiled reassurance. 'I've been very busy, but I prefer it that way.'

'She even tidied up without a murmur of complaint,' Lucifer informed the old lady, with an eyebrow cocked at Isobel. 'At least she didn't complain out loud.'

'Tidied up?' Nigel frowned. 'Tidied up what? You don't mean that you actually had the cheek to ask Isobel

to clear up that - that pigsty of an office of yours?'

'Was it a pigsty?' Lucifer asked, such a picture of innocence that his grandmother laughed.

'It was - well, untidy,' Isobel said. 'But it was soon tidy.'

'You'd no right to turn Isobel into a char,' Nigel told his brother shortly. 'She's a trained secretary and that's what you're paying her for.'

Isobel supposed that his injuries and the subsequent enforced inactivity had made Nigel less amiable than usual, but she had not realized quite how bad-tempered his good-looking face could be, and the contrast was especially noticeable beside Lucifer's apparent good humour. She walked over to him, under the speculative gaze of his family, and covered his hand that lay on the chair arm.

'I didn't mind, Nigel,' she told him. "You know I had to tidy up after Mr. Pogson, quite often.'

'Pogson's an oaf,' Nigel informed her gruffly. 'You won't be going back to him.'

'I know,' Isobel agreed, 'but I was just pointing out that there's more to being a secretary than shorthand and typing.'

'Oh, there won't be any shorthand for me,' Lucifer pointed out, 'except for the odd letter or two now and then.'

'Really I don't mind in the least,' Isobel insisted, seeing Nigel bent on carrying it further and anxious to end the discussion. 'You look very tired,' she told Nigel, still holding his hand under hers. 'Are you in pain?'

'No.' He shook his head. 'It's just that I've been getting around a bit this morning and it takes it out of me rather.'

'Why don't you take it easier while you have the opportunity?' his brother asked with a grin. 'It's not every man has such a heaven-sent chance to be bone idle, in summer too. You don't know when you're in clover, my lad.'

Nigel's blue eyes glared at him balefully. 'It's all right for you,' he retorted, 'you're not confined to a blessed chair all day, or most of it anyway. I'm sick of being inactive.'

'Give me the chance!' Lucifer smiled, but Nigel glowered, determinedly ill-humoured.

'You always were a lazy devil when you had the opportunity.'

Lucifer's smile admitted it willingly and Isobel thought that the slightly exaggerated shrug and spread hands were deliberately overdone to emphasize his foreignness because he knew it annoyed Nigel. 'It's my Italian papa, I suppose, but I can imagine nothing more heavenly than a perfect excuse for doing nothing at all. Indolence comes naturally to me.'

'Oh, nonsense, Lucifer,' his grandmother protested laughingly. 'You're as industrious as anyone I know. You put most people to shame.'

'Except Nigel,' Lucifer argued. 'He's a regular whirlwind when he's on form. He lives, eats and sleeps work.' A black brow quirked in Isobel's direction. 'Well, almost,' he added softly.

Nigel frowned. 'If anyone listened to you,' he told him, 'they'd take me for an absolute bore, and I don't think I'm that.'

'Of course you're not, dear,' his grandmother consoled him. 'Now I think we'd better go in and have some lunch before Mrs. Clay thinks we're not interested.'

The meal was less of an ordeal than Isobel had feared, and her hostess managed to keep the peace between the two brothers with a skill that told of long practice. It was as well, Isobel thought ruefully, that the two men did not normally live in the same house or there would inevitably have been more serious quarrels. Nigel still found movement of his legs difficult and painful and he chafed at the necessary slower pace he was forced to keep to; this probably made things more than usually uneasy between them.

'I was hoping to take you to the County Show next week,' Nigel told Isobel as they finished lunch. 'I'm sorry I can't, because I think you'd have enjoyed it, and I haven't been for years.'

'The County Show?' She looked interested. 'If it's what I think you mean I would certainly have enjoyed it.' She shrugged and smiled consolingly at him. 'Never mind, perhaps we can go some other time.'

'Not until next year,' Nigel told her. 'It's only an annual event and it's one of the best of its kind in the country.'

'Oh well, never mind, it can't be helped. You can't hop about on your poor legs, can you?'

Lucifer, although presumably engrossed in conversation with the old lady, caught enough of what Nigel and Isobel were saying to get the general gist of it, and he looked interested. 'Do you like country shows, Miss Hendrix?' he asked, and Isobel looked surprised for a moment before nodding her head.

"Yes - yes, I do rather.' She told herself she had been rather rash to admit so much, and certainly Nigel anticipated his brother's next question, judging from his frown.

'Then will you come with me?'

She, flicked an uneasy glance at Nigel and hesitated when she saw the expression in his eyes. 'I - I don't think so, thank you, Mr. Bennetti.'

The look he gave his brother told her that he guessed the reason for her refusal and the black eyes glistened laughter, although he spoke seriously enough. 'But why not, if you like going to things like that?' he asked. 'I know Nigel can't go, but he isn't selfish enough to deny you the pleasure of going, surely. Are you, Nigel?'

Without appearing utterly selfish there was little Nigel could do or say other than to agree, and he nodded reluctantly. 'Of course, go if you want to, Isobel,' he told her. 'I'm sure you'll like it.'

'I do *like* that sort of thing,' she admitted, sorely tempted but still uncertain. It was obvious that Nigel disliked the idea of her going without him, even though he was verbally encouraging her.

'Then you should come,' Lucifer said as if the matter was now settled. 'We'll start early and make a day of it.'

Isobel said nothing, still wondering why she did not make more of an effort to resist being shanghaied into going with him. Lucifer Bennetti, it appeared, was a man who had no hesitation in making up his mind and making sure that everyone else complied with his ideas.

There was a hint of stubborn dislike, however, in Nigel's expression as he looked at his brother curiously. 'Will there be just the two of you?' he asked quietly - so quietly that Isobel sensed something other than mere curiosity behind the question.

Lucifer raised a brow, a half-smile crooking his mouth. 'Just the two of us,' he agreed, obviously following Nigel's train of thought but not prepared to meet him halfway.

Nigel's eyes glowed malice and his voice was edged with disapproval as he watched the other's face. 'What about Vanessa?' he asked.

If he had expected Lucifer to be discomfited by the question he must have been disappointed. 'What about Vanessa?'

Isobel's skin prickled warningly at the tension between them, although she thought Nigel was far more conscious of it than Lucifer, and it was obvious which one of them was going to come off best. She thought perhaps he always did, for Nigel already seemed less sure of himself.

'You usually take Vanessa to the County Show,' he said. 'I just wondered, that's all.'

Lucifer smiled, a slow dark smile that foretold triumph. 'Well, wonder no more,' he told his brother. 'Vanessa is otherwise engaged at an antique fair. She's flying out to Germany on the opening day of the show and she won't be back until the day after it closes. Does that answer you?' The question was quietly put and he smiled when he asked it, but Isobel thought it betrayed resentment at being questioned.

'I was only curious,' Nigel said, on the defensive, while Mrs. Grayson sought hastily to restore normality.

'It would be a shame if Miss Hendrix didn't see the show,' she said, smiling at Nigel consolingly. 'And I'm sure she'll enjoy it quite well with Lucifer, dear.'

'Of course,' Nigel agreed resignedly, and Isobel felt more uneasy than ever about accepting the invitation, although in actual fact she had

never really been given the chance to accept or refuse. One way or another, however, she seemed to be already committed, and she thought Lucifer was watching her, half expecting her to find some excuse not to go with him.

She smiled at him for the first time, wondering if he had made the offer because he wanted to take her or merely to annoy Nigel; either way she would hold him to the, promise now. 'I'm sure I shall enjoy it,' she said. 'If you're sure you can spare the time from your work, Mr. Bennetti.'

'Oh, we'll manage to get done, don't you worry about that,' he assured her with a grin. 'I'll work you late for a night or two to make up for it...'

'Lucifer, you really mustn't,' Mrs. Grayson objected mildly. 'You mustn't overwork Miss Hendrix like you did poor Mrs. Lomas; I'm not surprised she left you.'

'Tottie Lomas,' Lucifer told her, unrepentant, 'was not only the most unattractive female in existence, she was also a clock-watcher. I've already warned Miss Hendrix not to expect a nine-to-five job with me.'

'I'm afraid I've already blotted my copybook,' Isobel confessed, her explanation mainly for Nigel's benefit. 'I didn't arrive until a quarter past nine this morning.'

'You - late?' Nigel looked flatteringly surprised. 'I've never known that to happen, Isobel. Did you miss the bus?'

She shook her head. 'No, but I'm afraid I didn't allow for it taking so long to get here. I hadn't thought of it stopping at every stop all the way from Greenlaw.'

'It's a pretty murderous journey at that time of day,' Nigel told her. 'I've never used the bus, but I suppose it stands to reason that it's crowded with people going in to work and shopping in Edgemorton.'

'I realize it now,' Isobel said ruefully, 'but I just didn't think this morning. Tomorrow I'll get the one before.'

'It's a wretched journey for you,' Nigel sympathized. 'But there's nothing else for it, is there, darling?'

It was not only unusual for Nigel to use such an endearment with anyone else there, but there was also some odd feeling of expectancy about him, although she could not for the life of her think why there should be. As if he too sensed and interpreted something other than sympathy for her, Lucifer smiled to himself.

'Where are you staying?' Mrs. Grayson asked, a thoughtful look on her face, while Lucifer's smile grew even more knowing as he looked across at his brother.

'I have a room in Mudlan Street in Greenlaw,' Isobel told her, increasingly puzzled.

'Oh, but they're such horrid little houses, if I remember correctly,' the old lady said, and Isobel smiled wryly.

'It's a case of needs must, I'm afraid, Mrs. Grayson,' she said. 'So few people in Greenlaw let rooms, and it is nearer than Edgemorton. It's not much of a room, but the landlady's very nice.'

'I see no reason,' Mrs. Grayson declared, as if she had quite made up her mind, 'why you can't come here.'

The odd feeling of expectancy was at last explained when Isobel saw Nigel's look of satisfaction. 'It would be very much more convenient,' he said, and glared at Lucifer when he laughed.

'Very,' Lucifer said softly.

'Oh, but I couldn't possibly,' Isobel protested.

'My dear Miss Hendrix, of course you can.' The old lady was adamant and Isobel thought ruefully that Lucifer had probably inherited his implacable will, at least in part, from his grandmother. 'Did you notice the little cottage the other side of the gates from Lucifer's?' Mrs. Grayson asked, and immediately answered her own question. 'No, it's more than likely you didn't, because it's hidden by the rhododendrons. It used to be used by the gardener, but a full-time gardener is almost impossible to find these days and the cottage has been empty for some time now. It was too small for Lucifer *and* his man, so we had the other little house built, but it would be ideal for one, if you'd like to use it, my dear.'

'I - I'd love to,' Isobel said, too stunned for the moment to say much more, but intrigued with the idea of having her own little house, and no bus journey to work every day. 'If you're sure it would be all right.' She could not have said why it was Lucifer she looked at briefly when she said that, for he seemed completely unconcerned about the idea.

'There's nothing simpler,' Mrs. Grayson assured her.

'It's in perfect repair and all it needs is to be aired and the furniture moved back in. Say about a week or even less, and it'll be ready for you.' She smiled at Isobel knowingly, her blue eyes mischievous. 'I know Nigel will love having you so near at hand, my dear.'

'I certainly will,' Nigel agreed earnestly. 'Do take it, Isobel, I'd like you to.'

Isobel knew that he was watching her expectantly, but she was even more aware of Lucifer's black eyes fixed on her from across the table. 'Then I will,' she said at last. 'Thank you very much, Mrs. Grayson, it's very kind of you.'

'There, that's settled.' The old lady beamed her satisfaction. 'It will help Nigel's recovery no end, I'm sure of it, having you here, and save you all those beastly bus journeys.' She looked pleased with her persuasive powers. 'Apart from anything else,' she added, 'I shall have some female company sometimes, instead of all these men.'

'Only two of us, *cara mia*,' Lucifer protested lightly, and the old lady pulled a face at him.

'It *seems* more,' she told him. 'At least I shall be able to talk about things that interest only women, like fashions and such. I may be well over seventy, but I'm not old-fashioned and I like to talk about feminine things.'

'Oh, you're certainly not old-fashioned, Grandmama,' Lucifer assured her with a twinkle. 'I wouldn't be surprised to see you blossom out in the very latest gear any day now.'

'And so I might, you impudent rogue,' his grandmother retorted laughingly. 'Although I haven't the figure that Miss Hendrix has for showing it off.'

The remark brought Isobel once again, embarrassingly, under the scrutiny of those black eyes and she hastily lowered her own. 'I have to agree with you there,' Lucifer said softly, and sent her a wicked look that made his brother frown.

'At least I shall be able to see you more often,' Nigel told her. 'It means you can spend all your free time with me, Isobel.'

'It also means I can be on time in the mornings,' Isobel said with a wry smile. 'I hate being late, and especially on my first day.'

'Well, if you have such a guilty conscience about it,' Lucifer told her, 'you can make it up by working late tonight.'

'Oh, that's not—' Nigel began, but Isobel shook her head at him, sensing a challenge behind the suggestion, as if he expected her to protest as Nigel was doing.

'Of course I'll work late,' Mr. Bennetti,' she told him quietly. 'I owe you that much.' He looked, she thought, quite disappointed because she did not argue.

CHAPTER TWO

AFTER a week of working for Lucifer Bennetti, Isobel was still uncertain just what her feelings were towards him. He was not an easy man to know or to like, she thought, but at the same time there was something almost magnetically attractive about him and she had no difficulty in believing Nigel's rather sour comments about the number and variety of his brother's women friends. His grandmother adored him, that much was obvious, although she saw much less of him than she would like to have done, despite his living so near at hand.

Isobel had to admit to being very curious about the Vanessa that Nigel had referred to as Lucifer's usual companion at the County Show. She had got as far as discovering that her name was Vanessa Law and that she and Lucifer had been friendly for quite a long time. Indeed, more than friendly, if Nigel's raised brows were anything to go by.

'She's quite a character in her own way,' Nigel informed her on the day that Vanessa Law departed for Germany and the antique fair. 'You'll probably meet her sooner or later, working for Luke, although she doesn't go to his place very often; he believes in keeping work and play strictly apart.'

He would never, Isobel had discovered, use his brother's more exotic first name, and she could not help wondering if he did it with the express purpose of bringing Lucifer down to a more everyday level like himself. The older man's bland self-confidence, combined with his darkly foreign appearance, obviously discomfited Nigel, a fact which surprised Isobel who had, until now, known him always as a self-sufficient, rather unimaginative business executive.

'Is she pretty?' she asked, and Nigel shrugged.

'I suppose so, if you like that sort,' he allowed. 'Although more accurately I'd have called her eye-catching, stunning, something less feminine than pretty.'

Isobel laughed. 'She sounds rather formidable.'

He did not treat the remark as lightly as she expected, but frowned over it thoughtfully. 'In a way, she is. I suspect she's as foreign in origin as Luke is, although her name's British enough.'

It was difficult to believe, she thought, that he was talking about his own brother. The other's Italian father seemed to have condemned him as a foreigner in Nigel's eyes and nothing could redeem him.

'Is she dark like he is, then?'

'Dark as a cat,' Nigel declared, as if even darkness itself was suspect. 'Black hair and the most weird yellow eyes.'

'Yellow?' Isobel looked startled.

He nodded, still serious. 'They are yellow, especially in some lights, although she prefers to call them amber, I believe.'

'I - I don't think I've ever seen a human-being with yellow eyes, it sounds uncanny.'

He laughed shortly and completely without humour. 'She gives me the creeps, and God knows I'm not fanciful.'

Isobel laughed, trying to shake off the strange feeling of uneasiness he had aroused in her at the mention of the woman whose place she was to take at the County Show. Somehow he had managed to make Vanessa Law sound not only striking but uncanny, and not the kind of woman who would take kindly to being replaced, however temporarily.

'She sounds most unusual,' she said, and he looked at her for a moment thoughtfully, as if he debated with himself whether or not to say something that was on his mind. 'I don't suppose you've ever heard of the Elgin Circle, have you?' he asked at last, and Isobel frowned curiously, shaking her head.

'No, I don't think so. What is it? A club of some sort?'

'I suppose you could call it that,' Nigel agreed cautiously. 'They meet fairly regularly and discuss - well, their own particular interests.' He looked at her again, warily, as if he was still making up his mind whether or not to confide in her. 'Actually they're a group of people who are interested in the ancient arts of witchcraft.'

'Oh!' She looked at him uncertainly. 'I know - at least I've heard about people who take an interest in that sort of thing, but I never thought I'd be this close to it.'

'Oh, you don't have to be worried about it,' Nigel assured her. 'They keep pretty well to themselves, though they make no secret of their existence. They make a study of the old methods and the ways and means of explaining some of the seeming miraculous spells that the old witches worked.'

'It sounds spooky.'

'Not really,' he said. 'In fact they're rather bent on explaining that things weren't as spooky as they were made to appear. The group caused quite a stir at the time they started a couple of years back, but that was mainly because of the people who formed it. They were all either well-known or wealthy and therefore anything they did that was the least bit out of the ordinary was news, even if it didn't last long. It was mentioned in most of the more sensational dailies at the time.'

'And Vanessa Law belongs to them?'

'She certainly does,' Nigel informed her. 'She founded the group.'

Some uneasy warning tingle shivered along Isobel's spine and she knew the answer to her question even before she asked it. 'And your brother?'

He nodded, reluctantly, she guessed. 'Luke was roped in by Vanessa right from the start,' he told her, 'although he mostly treats it as more of a joke than a serious study and sometimes I think Vanessa gets furious with him.'

That was something Isobel could well believe. 'Of course this part of the world was once quite well known for - well, goings-on, wasn't it?' she asked. 'I mean the idea of witches and witchcraft died hard in some parts of the country.'

'In more parts of the country than you might suspect,' he informed her, sounding defensive. 'But I suppose the Cotswolds lend themselves to ancient beliefs and superstitions; there's a sort of atmosphere here that one doesn't find anywhere else.'

'It's quite the most beautiful countryside I've ever seen,' Isobel said, and meant it. 'It's so soft and pretty and so - so *old* somehow.'

'Exactly,' Nigel remarked. 'There's no doubt that it *does* have a - a feeling about it, despite the beauty of the scenery - or perhaps because of it, it's all slightly unreal somehow.'

'Does Mr. Bennetti find the atmosphere helps with his writing?' she asked, and laughed apologetically when he looked at her with raised brows. 'I have to admit,' she confessed, 'that I've never read any of his books.'

To her surprise he laughed, a rather short humourless one, it was true, but he so seldom even smiled that she was encouraged. 'That's marvellous,' he told her, taking her hand in his. 'I quite thought you'd

be a fan of Luke's, and here you are admitting that you've never even read one of his wretched books!' He leaned across and kissed her lightly beside her mouth. 'Isobel, you're wonderful, and *very* refreshing.'

'I never have much time for reading,' she said, feeling a bit guilty about the admission and his pleasure at it. After all, it would do no harm to read one of Lucifer's books and then she would not feel quite such a fool if he asked her about it at any time. 'I must get one and read it,' she said, 'out of curiosity if nothing else.'

Nigel smiled wryly. 'Well, don't bother buying one,' he told her. 'Gran has them all in her room, I'm sure she'd be only too delighted to lend you as many as you want.'

They were alone in the big sunny room with the french windows open to the garden and the heavy scented warmth of summer. Isobel could just see Mrs. Grayson at the far end of the lawn, busy among her precious roses, her white head bare in the bright sunlight and shining like silver as she moved. Just being here in the old house one felt more than ever the quiet serenity of the country; it seemed to envelop the old, mellow stone building, even encroaching into the beautifully kept garden where foxgloves and periwinkles grew along the hedge beyond the bordering trees.

'It's wonderful here,' she sighed. 'Almost too good to be true, and I'm so looking forward to moving in tomorrow.'

Nigel still held her hand, smiling at her, with his serious blue eyes alight with something it was all too easy to interpret. 'I'm looking forward to it, too,' he told her softly. 'I shall have you right here where I can see you as often as I like.'

'Only when I'm not working,' Isobel reminded him with a laugh. 'Don't forget I'm still a working girl.'

'With you working for Luke I'm not likely to be given the chance to forget it,' he said shortly, then squeezed her hand. 'But at least you'll be here where I can see you.' Hesighed. 'If only you could drive,' he told her, 'we could go out sometimes and really see the countryside. Just the two of us, Isobel. I'd love to show you some of the places I knew when I was a small boy.'

'You lived here when you were little?' She could think of no reason why that should surprise her so much, but it did. Perhaps because he had always seemed such a town man that the thought of him belonging among these soft hills and sunny meadows seemed out of character somehow.

'Of course, it's my home, didn't you realise that?'

She shook her head. 'No, no, I hadn't realized it.'

'I spent all my time here when I wasn't at school,' he said. 'Both of us did. Kanderby and Gran have always been our - our haven, if you like. We'd have been pretty badly off without them too, especially without Gran.'

'She's a very sweet person,' Isobel said sincerely.

'You don't know how sweet until you owe her as much as we do. She brought up both of us for most of our lives.'

'Oh, I see, I didn't realize that. You - you didn't see much of your parents?' It was the first time they had ventured on to such personal ground and she was unsure how willing he would be to talk about it.

'Almost nothing.' He sat back in his chair, his eyes lazily half-closed, still retaining his hold on her hand. 'Madge, my mother, was married before, you know. She was only recently divorced from Giulio Bennetti when she married my father. They'd travelled all over the world, she and Bennetti, and Luke went with them, but when she

remarried and I arrived, the idea of carting two children from one racing circuit to another, wherever my father happened to be racing, was too much for them, so we were left with Gran here at Kanderby, although Luke was at school by then, of course. I was about a year old and Luke was around seven.'

'Oh, I see.'

He laughed shortly and entirely without humour. 'I'm sure you do. Whenever my mother and father were in England I saw them, but most of the time I played second fiddle to a very busy social and motor-racing calendar.' He shrugged. 'Not that either of us bothered all that much, although I suppose Luke must have missed her more than I did he'd spent a lot more time with her.'

'He must have done,' Isobel agreed softly, thinking how much less resilient Nigel had proved than his half- brother. Or perhaps he just showed his resentment more obviously.

'Once we were both at boarding school,' Nigel went on, apparently nothing loath to talk now that he had started, 'we seldom saw each other except during holidays.'

'Weren't you at the same school?'

'Oh, lord, no! Luke spent most of his early days at some fancy place in Rome, and only came over here permanently when he came to university.'

'Oh yes, of course, I suppose he was near his father.'

Nigel pulled a face. 'Bennetti was no more of a natural parent than mine was. Madge has a talent for finding unlikely fathers and giving them children. No, Luke's father paid the bills and that was as far as parental interest went. Gran was the centre of both our worlds, although we're so different.'

'And you certainly are different,' Isobel agreed ruefully, remembering her own initial shock at the sight of Lucifer.

'Of course,' Nigel said, 'six years is quite a big gap between children anyway, too much for them to be really close, even if they're full brothers and share a common outlook.'

'Which you and - and Lucifer don't?'

'No - thank God!' He sounded so bitter that it came as a shock to her. She had always known, or at least guessed, that they did not see eye to eye on most things, but she had not realized quite how much he resented his brother, and resent him he undoubtedly did, although she could not imagine why. His own position as a child had surely been no more unstable than Lucifer's, rather less so in fact since Lucifer must remember being with his mother and father for the first few years of his life.

'What I don't understand,' she said slowly, looking down at their clasped hands, 'is why you persuaded me to come and work for him if you dislike him so much.'

He looked up sharply, as if her choice of words startled him, holding her gaze steadily for a moment before shaking his head. 'I don't know that I dislike him, actually,' he denied, though he sounded uncertain, as if the idea had not occurred to him before. 'Does it sound that way to you?'

'In a way,' Isobel admitted. 'Although I'm probably quite wrong,' she added hastily.

'I don't know. I never have been sure how I felt about Luke, he was always such a—' He laughed shortly. 'He's so different, I suppose,' he admitted. 'I never quite understood him.'

'Why *did* you want me to have this job with him?'

He smiled, faced with something he was certain of for a change. 'You know why - because I wanted you here, where I could see you. You were so far away in town.' He raised her face to him with a hand under her chin. 'You'll like it here, won't you, Isobel?'

Isobel smiled. 'Oh yes, I'll like it here, who wouldn't? It's so beautiful and I love the country, I always have.' She did not venture to ask what would happen when he was fully recovered and returned to London and to work again. Whether he would expect her to leave here and her very lucrative job with Lucifer to go back with him to Frome's. That was something that would no doubt have to be faced some time or other, but better, at the moment, to leave things as they were.

'You get on with Luke?' Nigel asked, breaking into her muse. 'I mean he doesn't drive you too hard?'

She laughed, shaking her head. 'On the contrary, he just leaves me to get on with my work and says very little. It's very easy, much easier than I expected.'

'That's O.K., then.' He sighed, apparently satisfied for the moment. 'At least I don't have to bother about him—' He shrugged, looking a bit sheepish and as if he was ashamed of his own thoughts. 'Well, I *know* you'll be all right,' he said, as if convinced at last. 'He never takes much of an interest in girls of your age, he always sticks to the sophisticated thirties, *they're* his type.'

'Are they?' She wondered if Nigel really believed that or if he was deliberately closing his eyes to the possibility of Lucifer finding her attractive.

'Anyway,' Nigel added, 'he'll never be really serious about anyone, he's too much of the Latin lover to let anyone get near enough to *mean* anything to him.'

'I can see what you mean.' Isobel thought of the dark, satanic-looking face and the black eyes of Lucifer Ben- netti and wondered if it *was* possible for anyone to get close enough to him to touch his heart. Perhaps Nigel was right, after all he was his brother and perhaps knew him as well as anyone did.

'Are you going with him to the County Show on Thursday?'

Isobel blinked hastily, realizing how deep in thought she had been. Yes - yes, I think so, Nigel.' She looked at him, wide grey eyes curious and a little anxious. 'You don't mind if I go, do you?'

He did not answer for a moment, but ran a caressing finger over the back of her hand. "Yes, I mind," he admitted at last. 'I mind like hell, Isobel, but as Luke says, I'd be utterly selfish to deprive you of the pleasure of going just because I'm out of action.' He glared down at his legs, still encased in plaster. 'I feel so damned helpless like this.'

'I know,' Isobel consoled him, 'and I wish there was something I could do to help. Maybe,' she added, suddenly inspired, 'I could stay here with you, while my boss goes to the show on his own.'

Nigel pulled a face, shaking his head. You don't know Luke. He's made up his mind he's taking you to the show and he will, or neither of you will go. I'm as bad scalded as burned; either way he has your company and I don't.'

Isobel had been wondering just how to broach the subject of her moving into the garden cottage the following day. With two suitcases to carry it would be so much easier if she caught the later bus which would not be so crowded, but she was hesitant about asking Lucifer for the requisite time off, especially in view of the fact that she would be doing no work at all the following day after that, when she would be at the show with him.

To her surprise, however, it was he who raised the matter as they were finishing work for the day. 'I'll come and fetch you tomorrow morning,' he informed her as she finished off a page prior to packing up, and she looked at him for a second or two in silence.

'Oh! Oh no, there's no need, Mr. Bennetti,' she managed at last. 'I can manage quite well on my own, I only have two cases.'

'But you don't want to have to lug them on and off a crowded bus at that hour in the morning,' he told her.

'I - I was going to ask if I could come on the later one,'

Isobel confessed. 'So that it wouldn't be quite so crowded.'

'Why catch a bus at all when I've said I'll fetch you?' The black eyes attributed all sorts of discomfiting reasons to her hesitation and she was forced, at last, to nod agreement.

'It's very good of you, thank you.'

He came over and sat on the edge of her desk, looking down at her with that same disconcerting gaze. 'You just don't trust me, do you?'

'I didn't say that,' Isobel objected. 'I've never even suggested it.'

He grinned wickedly. 'No, but I'll bet Nigel has and you've taken his word for it.'

'Taken his word for what?' She determinedly began to type another line, not waiting for him to answer, but he put a finger on the carriage release lever and sent the platen shooting along out of her control, grinning at her frown of frustration.

'For the fact that I'm no better than I should be,' he told her, unconcernedly. The black eyes drew and held her gaze no matter how hard she fought against it. 'And you believe it, don't you?'

She refused to be flustered by his deliberate shock tactics and shrugged with apparent unconcern as she regained control of the machine and prepared to finish her line, despite the way her heart was hammering, almost in panic, against her ribs. 'I think it's quite possible you lead a very busy social life,' she agreed primly, and he exploded into laughter.

'What a delightful way of putting it,' he told her.

Isobel got on with her typing. 'I'm glad you approve,' she told him as she reached the end of the line. 'Now if you don't mind, Mr. Bennetti, I'd like to finish this page before I leave.'

'Are you in a hurry to leave?'

She sighed resignedly, looking up at him still perched on the edge of her desk. 'No more than I usually am,' she said, 'although I do have things to pack if I'm moving in the morning.'

'And you *are* moving in the morning,' he said. 'Nigel worked it very neatly, didn't he?'

Isobel frowned. 'Worked it neatly?'

He nodded, grinning in such a way that she could cheerfully have hit him before she even heard what he had to say. 'I recognized his tactics that first day,' he told her, and Isobel remembered that knowing smile he had worn while Mrs. Grayson was making her the offer of the cottage. 'I suppose *he* told you to get that particular bus that morning, didn't he?' Isobel nodded, seeing his reasoning at last and disliking the idea of the old lady having been tricked into making her the offer. 'And he said himself,' Lucifer went on, 'that it was always crowded

and therefore took longer than usual to get here. He *knew* you'd be late that morning.'

'Oh, he wouldn't do a thing like that!' Isobel objected, knowing he was right but not prepared to admit it. 'He knows I hate being late.'

'He also knows that the cottage has been standing empty,' Lucifer insisted. 'And he knows that Grandmama has a very soft heart and would offer you the cottage to save you that journey every morning and evening.'

Isobel kept her eyes lowered, typing forgotten for the moment. 'He - he wouldn't do anything like that,' she 'insisted.

'He would, you know.' His smile teased her, as he recognized her unwillingness to admit it. 'I know my little brother better than you do, don't forget. I've seen him "work crafty little schemes like this before.'

'But why?' she asked, still unwilling to face it. 'Why didn't he ask Mrs. Grayson in the first place if he wanted me to have the cottage?'

He shrugged, leaving his perch on her desk and walking across to the window. 'Grandmama knows it too,' he said. 'He probably gets more satisfaction out of manoeuvring people without them realizing it.'

'Oh, you have no call to say things like that about Nigel,' she protested. 'I know he's your brother - your half-brother, Mr. Bennetti, and you claim to know him well, but you shouldn't say things like that about him. It isn't as if you were ever really close, and—'

'Who told you that?' he interrupted, and she bit her lip on the indiscretion.

'Well - well, I can imagine you weren't,' she said. 'You're so different.'

'For which Nigel thanks God, I imagine,' he said, with such startling accuracy that she wondered for one crazy minute if he could possibly have overheard Nigel's words to her.

'It's obvious you wouldn't get on,' she insisted. 'It's - it's like-'

'Chalk and cheese?' he suggested softly, and laughed again at her discomfiture.

She lowered her eyes before the gaze that both teased and disturbed her. '*Will* you let me get this page done?' she said.

'Certainly.' He grinned at her over his shoulder. 'You don't like the idea of your Nigel doing anything underhand, do you?'

'I don't believe he - he intended it to be underhand,' Isobel declared. 'I've only your word for it and, if you'll forgive me saying so, I don't know that I care to rely on that too much.'

'Why, you cheeky little—' He stared at her for a moment, then burst into laughter again, shaking his head at her. 'I should either sack you or slap you for impudence,' he told her, 'but I suppose you have some revenge owing to you, so I'll let you get away with it this time.'

'Also,' Isobel went on, determinedly righteous, 'I wish you wouldn't refer to him as *my* Nigel. It's an incorrect assumption.'

'An incorrect assumption.' He rolled the words round his tongue. 'What a grand phrase for telling me that you and Nigel aren't—' He used one hand to such expressive purpose that Isobel flushed.

'Well, we're *not!*' she retorted indignantly.

'*You* may not be,' he allowed calmly, 'but Nigel definitely is.'

'Well, either way it's no Concern of yours.' 'It will be if he talks you round to marrying him,' he declared with embarrassing bluntness. 'Mr. Bennetti—' 'And if he does,' he went on as if she had not spoken, 'that will make you my sister-in-law - half-sister-in-law,' he corrected himself hastily, 'so in the circumstances I think it would sound much more matey if you called me Lucifer.'

'I don't agree,' Isobel argued. 'For one thing you're my employer and I've never called my employer by his christian name.'

'Not even Nigel?' She shook her head firmly. 'Not during working hours,' she said. 'I always called him Mr. Frome then.' 'How very proper,' he taunted. 'It's quite usual in business, Mr. Bennetti. It's not really good for discipline to call one's employer by his christian name.'

His black eyes glittered wickedly at her for a moment. 'I'm surely exempt from that rule, aren't I?' he suggested.

'My name's more pagan than Christian, isn't it?'

By about nine-thirty the following morning Isobel was beginning to think that Lucifer Bennetti had forgotten his promise to fetch her and her suitcases, and she had just decided that she would catch the later bus as she had first intended, when he arrived.

She heard the front door bell ring loud and insistently and then her landlady's voice in the hall downstairs and Lucifer's deep quiet one. She was already half way out of her room when the woman called up to her, 'Gentleman for you, Miss Hendrix.'

'Thank you.' She put her suitcases out on to the landing and closed the door, turning in time to see a bemused and flattered landlady

disappearing into her own sitting- room and Lucifer just starting up the stairs with a wide grin on his dark face.

'Did you think I'd forgotten you?' he asked as he picked up her cases and started downstairs again, without waiting for an answer.

'I was just going out to catch the bus,' she told him. 'I *did* think you'd forgotten, or else changed your mind.'

'I seldom change my mind,' he told her, putting her cases into the boot of his car. 'Not once it's made up.' He saw her into the car and closed the door on her. 'Your landlady thinks the worst,' he declared as he slid behind the steering-wheel, and directed a wicked smile at her straight face. 'The worst or otherwise, depending on your point of view.'

'Judging by the expression on her face just now,' Isobel said, 'she suspects the worst and looks upon it as otherwise.'

He laughed softly, taking the long powerful car easily up into top gear as they picked up speed. 'I rather think she fancied me herself,' he informed her, nothing loath to boast of his conquest, and Isobel looked at him speculatively.

'I expect you gave her the full treatment,' she remarked. 'She *would* be impressed.'

'But you're not?'

She wished she could have sounded more convincing when she answered him. 'I'm not easily impressed, Mr. Bennetti.'

'Lucifer.' She sat silently, refusing to be drawn, but feeling some strange magnetism forcing her, quite against her will, to look at him, and when she did the black eyes gleamed at her in triumph briefly before turning back to the road ahead. 'Lucifer,' he repeated.

'Lucifer,' she echoed obediently, and clenched her hands at the soft sound of his laughter.

CHAPTER THREE

DECIDING to be co-operative, Isobel was ready in good time the following morning and waiting to be collected for her outing to the County Show. She admitted to being far more nervous than was reasonable in the circumstances and told herself she was being utterly ridiculous, but outside of working hours she saw very little of Lucifer and the idea of spending almost an entire day in his company, without the normal distraction of work, gave her a curiously fluttery feeling.

She had told him that he could find her at Kanderby House, as she wanted to have a word with Nigel before they left. She had dressed with care, hoping that her long-sleeved, flowery print dress would be considered appropriate to the occasion, and then at the last minute wondered if something more tweedy would have been better.

A last-minute, rather panicky check with a mirror had reassured her and she felt quite summery and light-hearted with her thick fair hair loose about her shoulders, instead of tied back as it more usually was. Any doubts she might have had about her appearance were banished as soon as Nigel caught sight of her, pulling her down to him so that he could kiss her appreciatively. 'You look lovely,' he told her. 'Absolutely lovely, and I envy Luke being seen with you.'

She dipped him a mock curtsy and sat beside him, her hand still held in his. 'I do wish you could come too, Nigel,' she said. 'I feel horribly guilty about going off like this and leaving you here, and it's such a lovely day too.'

'Don't feel guilty,' he told her, kissing her gently. *'Why should you?'*

'Perhaps because I know you don't really like me going with your brother.'

He pulled a face. 'I made that pretty obvious, didn't I?' he admitted. 'But please don't let it bother you, Isobel, I'm not really jealous of Luke.'

'I should think not,' Isobel told him hastily, feeling nevertheless an irrepressible skip of excitement at the prospect of the day before her.

'I know I don't have to be,' he said, and put a hand to her face, smiling. 'I know you'll come back to me,' he added softly.

'Of course I will.'

.'Are you quite happy working for Luke?'

The question was unexpected at this moment, although it was not the first time he had asked it, and she hesitated before answering. 'Yes, I quite like working for him,' she said. 'It's very interesting and not too hard work, not in the usual sense of the word. There's seldom any hurry for anything and I can do it in my own time as long as I get it done, he doesn't seem to mind how. It's not hard work, I've no complaints on that score.'

'On what score, then?' he asked, and she laughed, supposing she had made it sound rather as if there were other grounds for complaint.

'No score at all," she assured him hastily. 'I've no grumbles about anything, Nigel, so I suppose I must like working for him.'

'That was one of the things that worried me at first,' he admitted, and smiled when she looked at him curiously. 'That you might get to like working for him *too* much,' he explained, and she shook her head.

'I shan't,' she declared firmly, taking his meaning.

Nigel sighed. 'I suppose I was taking a bit of a chance

asking you to come here,' he said. 'I know it's only because I'm here again,' he admitted as if his own doubts embarrassed him, 'but Luke's so—' he shrugged uneasily. 'I don't know - it's simply that when I'm here I begin to believe all sorts of things I'd normally laugh to scorn.'

Isobel looked at him questioningly. 'Well, if it concerns your brother and anything to do with me,' she told him, 'you needn't believe anything. No matter how persuasive he is,' she added.

'It's not persuasion so much I'm thinking about,' he said, and laughed shortly. 'Oh, it's ridiculous, I know, but sometimes I almost believe some of that silly nonsense they dabble in. Vanessa and her crew,' he added by way of explanation, and Isobel looked startled.

'That - that black magic flub you mentioned?' she asked, and he nodded. 'But, Nigel, you don't *believe* in that sort of thing, do you?'

'Not when I'm miles away in London,' he said, 'but here - it's different, Isobel. You must feel it, even in the short time you've been here.' His blue eyes begged for understanding. 'Don't you feel that sometimes Luke is - is just that bit too - different?'

Isobel shook her head determinedly. 'No. No, I don't, Nigel. He's just an ordinary man whose looks give him a slightly sinister appearance at times, that's all.' It was not all, by any means, and Isobel knew it. Ordinary was certainly not the right word to apply to Lucifer Bennetti, but she refused to recognize that his undeniable attraction owed itself to anything other than nature.

They both glanced up, startled, when soft footsteps sounded on the paved area outside the french windows and, a second later, Lucifer walked in. He stood just inside the open windows, his dark eyes paying far more lavish homage to her looks than any words of Nigel's haddone, sweeping over her from head to toe in one expressive look that brought the colour flooding to her face.

'Good morning.'

Whether or not Nigel was included in the greeting, he made little effort to reply to it and it was left to Isobel. 'Good morning, Mr. Bennetti.'

A black brow shot upwards. 'I thought we'd settled that Mr. Bennetti business yesterday morning,' he said, and Isobel glanced hastily at Nigel before answering.

'I still think—' she began, but was cut short by a quiet laugh.

'So do I,' he told her adamantly. 'Lucifer - whether Nigel likes it or not. *I'm* your boss now and I don't object, so I don't see why he should.'

Nigel's look of disgust should have made him shrink, but he merely smiled, watching Isobel steadily as if he dared her to argue. Isobel stayed stubbornly silent for a moment, then she got up from her place beside Nigel, her voice determinedly matter-of-fact. 'I'm ready when you are, Mr. Bennetti.'

'And I'm ready when you decide to be a little more friendly. If you're going to keep up this boss and secretary game, then we may as well stay here and work.'

Isobel looked up at him, trying to judge just how serious the threat was, and one look at the dark face with its jaw stubbornly set was enough to tell her that he meant exactly what he said. 'All right,' she said shortly. 'Have it your way, Lucifer.'

He grinned. 'I usually do,' he told her with such unabashed, pleasure at the fact that, had it not been for Nigel's black frown, she thought she would have laughed at the sheer impudence of it.

Isobel smiled down at Nigel, grumpy-looking in his chair, and bent to kiss him beside his mouth. 'Good-bye, Nigel, I wish you could come too.'

'Good-bye.' He released her hand reluctantly. 'Take care.' It was a vague warning, but it sent a swift unexpected shiver along her spine as she stepped out into the sunshine with his brother, following his long-legged stride out to where he had parked his car.

It was, she thought as he helped her into the car, a vehicle typical of him. It was long, sleek and shiny and looked hot and red in the bright sun. Not quite respectable was the term that came to mind, although she dismissed it hastily as not only fanciful but ridiculous.

He slid his long legs under the steering wheel and turned to look at her inquiringly. 'Do you mind the top being down?'

Isobel shook her head, anticipating the welcome breeze their movement would raise. 'Not at all,' she said. 'It'll be nice and cool, and it's very hot at the moment.'

He slammed the door shut with an apparently satisfied smile. 'Good. I had a nasty suspicion you might turn out to be a hot-house flower.'

'Well, I'm not,' she said firmly. 'I quite enjoy a good blow with the wind through my hair, especially when it's like it is today. It's really lovely.'

He looked at her golden-fair hair shining richly in the sun and smiled. 'I agree,' he said, deliberately misunderstanding. 'It's very lovely loose like that.' Isobel did not answer, she said nothing, but merely lifted her face to the breeze as they turned out of the short drive and on to the road.

She had to admit as they drove along that she thoroughly enjoyed the ride in the open car. The wind they created lifted her long hair from

her neck and made her thankful she had thought to wear sun-glasses. Dusty green leaves in the hedgerows flicked and twirled as they passed and dappled the car and their faces with tiny fleeting shadows.

She even found herself relaxing completely in the deep comfortable seat, her head back the better to catch the breeze as it skimmed above the windscreen, she even took advantage of his preoccupation with driving to study her companion, the dark, Mephistophelean features, so appropriate to his unusual name, and the thick black hair blowing wildly awry in the wind and adding to the overall effect of turbulence. There seemed always to be an air of unrest about him, perhaps even excitement and she had never yet been quite at ease with him, no matter how she tried.

He drove well, but with the same rakish air that he brought to everything else he did, although she was pretty sure that some of it at least was put on with the idea of showing off to her. On second thoughts the idea of his even bothering to show off to her made her smile ruefully, thinking herself unobserved.

'You're smiling like a little pussy,' he told her, turning suddenly, and she looked startled at having her reverie broken into. 'What are you so pleased with yourself for?'

'I don't know that I'm pleased with myself about anything in particular,' she denied, certainly not prepared to let him know the reason for her smile.

'You looked it,' he told her.

'Well, I'm not.'

He cocked a dark brow at her momentarily, seeking her reaction. 'You looked rather like a bewitching little sorceress who's well pleased with her latest spell. A sort of prettily picked look.'

'Nothing of the sort,' Isobel denied, her heart pattering uneasily when she remembered Nigel's words about him being more than just different. His interest in witchcraft, she told J^erself, had nothing to do with his remark to her, it was nothing but coincidence and she was letting Nigel's rather unreasonable suspicions rub off on her. 'I - I can't think why you should make so much of a perfectly natural reaction to a lovely day,' she told him.

'I ordered this lovely day especially for you,' he informed her, flicking a crooked smile at her over one shoulder.

She made a face over the boast and smiled, albeit a little uneasily. 'You must have a lot of influence with the weather man,' she said, staring at the rugged, dark profile as his laugh shivered down her spine like a trickle of icy water.

'You'd be surprised *who* I have influence with,' he told her softly, and turned his black eyes on her briefly.

"No, I wouldn't, not really,' she denied. 'I imagine you're very good at making things go your way.'

He laughed. 'You really believe that, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Do you mind telling me why?'

She looked at him uneasily, wondering if he was already laughing at her. There was a hint of smile at the corner of his wide mouth, but his eyes were fixed straight ahead and half hidden by long lashes, so she could not tell for certain. She shook her head.

'I don't know; I just think - *imagine* that you're strong-willed enough to get your own way, that's all.'

That was not all, she thought wildly, as Nigel's words hammered away again at her brain and her pulses throbbed at her temple and the wrists of her hands clenched tightly in her lap. Even the bright sunlight and her own common sense could not entirely dismiss that sense of slightly sinister unreality he gave her, and she started almost visibly when he appeared to follow her thoughts.

'Are you interested in witchcraft, Isobel?'

'No! No, of course not, why do you ask?' He shrugged. 'I just wondered. A lot of people round here are.'

'I don't take it as very much of a compliment that you think me a witch,' she told him.

'I didn't say you were,' he denied. 'But you'd make rather a pretty witch if you were.' She looked at him suspiciously and, as if he sensed her gaze, he turned his head again briefly and smiled. 'A *very* pretty witch,' he said softly.

'I haven't the least desire to be a witch, thank you,' she informed him. 'Pretty or otherwise - even if I believed in such things, which I don't.'

He was silent for a second or two and she watched the dark face from under her lashes, curious now to see how he would react. 'Oh, but you should,' he told her solemnly, at last. 'Especially in this part of the country.'

'Well, I don't.' She felt far less certain about it than she sounded.

'But you get a little cold shudder every time it's mentioned,' he guessed, and laughed softly at the swift, suspicious look she gave him.

'You're - you're wrong, I don't.'

'No? O.K., have it your way.'

'Nigel told me you belong to a - a club or something that believes - studies witchcraft,' she ventured, wondering if she was treading on too delicate ground after her brave assertion of disbelief, but he appeared unconcerned.

'The Elgin Circle,' he said. 'It's a giggle.'

'But some of them take it very seriously, don't they?'

'Oooh, my goodness, yes!' He grinned at her briefly. 'The rest of them are very serious indeed about it all.'

'But you don't believe in it?'

'I didn't say that, I try to keep an open mind on most controversial subjects like that. I just believe in enjoying myself, that's all, instead of being gloomy about it.' He laughed again, and Isobel could imagine how much his light-hearted attitude would annoy those serious students of the occult. 'In fact,' he added with some satisfaction, 'I think they'd throw me out if they dare, but I have the edge on them, of course, and they're cautious about actually sending me packing.' 'Oh?'

He turned a wry smile on her briefly. 'Well, wouldn't *you* think twice about giving Lucifer his marching orders from an order of witches?' he asked.

That involuntary shiver slid along Isobel's spine again. 'It's nonsense,' she insisted.

'You just wait,' he chuckled, 'Vanessa will convince you. If anyone can, she will!'

Isobel frowned. 'I don't want to be convinced,' she assured him. 'I've told you, I don't believe in such things.'

She was curious because his apparent reluctance to dismiss it all as nonsense both puzzled and, to a certain extent, troubled her. 'Forewarned is forearmed,' he told her. 'At least you should know something about it as you're likely to be involved at some time or other.'

She stared at him, certain he meant what he said, but scarcely believing he could. 'I have no intention of being involved,' she declared, trying to steady her voice so that he would not suspect the way her hands trembled and her heart raced. 'It's utter nonsense in this day and age. It's all ancient history and there's no good can come from raking over old ashes.'

Surprisingly he laughed. 'When talking about witches,' he informed her, 'that's rather an unfortunate turn of phrase, isn't it?'

'You know what I mean,' she said, and was surprised to hear herself sounding almost apologetic.

'Yes, I know what you mean,' he admitted. 'And here we are.'

He turned the car into a field, presently doing duty as a car park, and Isobel's eyes widened when she saw the number of other cars and other vehicles of every sort already parked there. She had expected nothing as big as this, not nearly so many people even, and she saw Lucifer recognize her surprise with a smile.

Another gate gave access to the showground proper, already swarming with people, most of them much too warmly clad for the weather and looking uncomfortably hot. It was many years since she had visited a country show like this and she breathed in the hot, humid scents reminiscently.

There was always a special sort of smell peculiar to such gatherings and it seemed universally the same, a smell she could never quite analyse. Crushed dry grass, hot engine oil and livestock predominated, with the whole overlaid with too much warm humanity in too small an area. But there was a sense of liveliness and excitement that Isobel responded to as they made their way through the crowd.

'Is there anywhere you'd like to go first?' Lucifer asked, rather surprising her by consulting her.

Isobel shook her head, content to follow his lead. 'I don't mind in the least,' she told him. 'You know your way around better than I do, I expect.'

'Possibly,' he allowed, and put a hand under her arm as they made "their way past a display of farm machinery. 'I don't suppose you're interested in tractors and combine harvesters for a start, are you?' She shook her head, and he smiled down at her. 'You didn't expect so many people, did you?'

'It's very much bigger altogether than I expected,' she admitted, and looked up at him curiously. 'You seem to have somewhere in mind,' she told him as he led her unhesitatingly along. 'Where are we heading?'

'For the horses,' he grinned. 'You like horses, don't you?'

She blinked surprise at the accuracy of his guess. 'Yes, as a matter of fact I'm very fond of horses of all sorts, but-'

His laugh cut her short. 'First lesson in understanding witchcraft among other things,' he told her, 'is a basic knowledge of psychology. I watched your reaction when I mentioned horses and I saw the tell-tale look in your eyes that gave me the clue. If I hadn't seen it I'd

have tried sheep, pigs and cows in that order, but the odds were pretty short on me being right first time.'

So that, Isobel thought wryly, was how he could apparently follow her thoughts with such accuracy. How he had been able to impress her with his talk about witches so closely following on her own thoughts about his association with the occult. He had seen and noted her reaction to being-called a bewitching little sorceress and taken it on from there. He was right, psychology was the basis of the seeming mystery and, for the moment, the thought comforted her.

'Very clever,' she told him, eyeing him curiously. 'But why this insistence on witchcraft? It's much too lovely a day to think about spooky, unpleasant things like that.'

He shrugged. 'Just in case,' he said, and a moment later laughed. 'Come on, let's go and find your horses.'

It surprised Isobel how many people he seemed to know, until she remembered that he had spent a good deal of his childhood here, and that he still lived among the same people now and was therefore completely at home. Also, despite his dark, foreign appearance, he fitted into his surroundings surprisingly well, far better than she could imagine Nigel doing. Nigel always seemed so very much a town man, whereas Lucifer's dark face was much less noticeable among all the weather-beaten, well-tanned faces of the country people.

He wore no jacket and his shirt was open at the neck, a strong brown throat contrasting with fine white cotton. Hot weather suited him and he looked almost too discomfitingly attractive, drawing the eyes of every woman they passed, and taking it all in his stride, Isobel thought wryly.

Her own cheeks were bright with warmth and her eyes going from one attraction to another, anxious to miss nothing. There were

side-shows even, in one small section, and a long white marquee selling refreshments, the latter catching her eye as she realized how thirsty she was.

'You could do with a drink,' Lucifer informed her with a smile, and she nodded.

'Psychology again, I suppose,' she guessed, and he laughed.

'You *are* thirsty, aren't you?'

'I am,' she admitted, 'and I suppose I betrayed it by licking my lips when I saw the refreshment marquee.'

'Exactly,' he laughed. 'You learn quickly, *piccola*.'

They sat in the half shade, stealing the edge of the shadow cast by a huge oak, the grass cool and soft as they sank down on to it. Isobel drank half her drink in one go and sighed her relief as it cooled her dry throat, leaning back on her hands, her legs curled up under her. She glanced up when Lucifer waved a casual hand to someone over near the entrance of the marquee.

The man he greeted returned the wave and a second later Isobel glanced curiously at Lucifer when he started across the grass towards them, a big sketch pad tucked under one arm. 'An artist?' she asked, and Lucifer nodded.

'And an old acquaintance.' She may have imagined it, but she thought she detected sarcasm in the remark.

The man stopped in front of them, his eyes going curiously to Isobel before he spoke. 'Hello, Lucifer, long time no see.'

'Quite a long time,' Lucifer admitted, as the newcomer flopped down in the shade, the sketch pad on his hunched knees. 'I'm surprised to see you here, Gal, I thought country fairs were a bit out of your line.'

The shoulders under the rather stained shirt shrugged. 'I'm earning an honest crust,' he said wryly. 'Sketching the county and the general hoi-polloi alike. A few bob here and there.'

'Oh, I see, you're working.'

'Uhuh.' The shaggy head nodded. 'I don't know who your lovely lady is, but I could enjoy doing her head.'

Lucifer smiled, casting an oddly proprietorial glance at Isobel which she noted with some surprise. 'I'll bet you would, but I doubt if you could do her justice in the time you have available.' He waved a casual hand between the man and Isobel and performed perfunctory introductions. 'Cal; Isobel Hendrix. Isobel; Cal Ford.'

The man's eyes studied Isobel carefully for a second before he summoned a dry smile. 'Very nice too,' he remarked, and Isobel flushed at the obvious interpretation he put on her presence there with Lucifer.

'I'm Mr. Bennetti's secretary,' she informed him, and saw Lucifer's smile of amusement.

'Oh, I see.' The gaze was even more curious now and discretion went to the wind as he gave voice to what had obviously been on his mind all along. 'I thought you were a little bit out of Lucifer's usual line,' he told her bluntly, 'and much younger too.' He looked at Lucifer questioningly. 'I expected you to be with Vanessa, as usual,' he told him. 'Is she missing or have you two—?' His hands spread expressively and Isobel wondered if he too had

origins similar to Lucifer's.

'She's in Germany.'

'Oh!' Isobel thought he was disappointed and so, apparently, did Lucifer, for there was a hint of malice in his voice when he spoke again.

'Disappointed?' he asked softly, and the artist's thin face flushed.

'I told you,' he said, 'I'm working; meeting old friends is. a bonus.'

Isobel felt uneasy. Obviously the man was an admirer of Vanessa Law's and Lucifer was being rather cruel in taunting him about it. She could feel sorry for Cal Ford if he was in competition with Lucifer for Vanessa's attention, for he would be formidable opposition for any man.

'Aah!' The black eyes recognized a half-truth.

The man's restless hands flicked open the sketch pad and he sat staring at the blank page as he spoke. 'I seldom see Vanessa these days. She's busy, I'm busy and - well, you know the way it goes.'

'I know the way it goes,' Lucifer agreed, and added so quietly that Isobel only just heard it, 'You're a fool, Cal.'

'Maybe,' the man shrugged. 'Beggars can't be choosers, but you wouldn't know, would you?'

'I don't believe in being a beggar,' Lucifer told him quietly but adamantly. 'If I want anything I go out and get it, but thank God I've never yet let any woman get under my skin to that extent.'

'You're a cocky devil,' Cal Ford said bitterly, 'but I wish I had half your cheek.'

Lucifer smiled, shaking his head, glancing at Isobel a second later, as if he had only now remembered she was there. Nobel's a pretty child,' he told him. 'If you're working, you can do a sketch of her.' The artist looked at her again with curious eyes .as Lucifer smiled at her. 'Show the man your best side, *bella mia*.'

The endearment, accompanied by the unexpected request, stunned Isobel for a moment and she stared at him wide-eyed. 'But you can't be serious,' she said at last.

'Of course I am.' The black eyes glittered with laughter despite his claim to be serious, and he put out a hand to cup her chin, turning her head first this way, then that, his head on one side as he studied her. 'Hmm,' he decided at last. 'Full face, I think, then it will show your beautiful eyes.'

'Lucifer—'

'Don't argue,' he told her quietly, 'just look at Cal and relax.'

Cal Ford nodded approval, already making the first bold lines on the virgin page of the pad, nodding his head as he worked, while Isobel sat as still as she was able, thinking she had never felt so gaucheely uneasy in her life before. Once she moved her head inadvertently and Lucifer's strong fingers turned her head back to its original position, his smile recognizing her embarrassment.

'Sit still,' he told her. 'If you fidget you'll put the man off his stroke.'

'Nearly finished now,' Cal Ford said, a smile sympathizing with her, and charcoal flew over the paper, shading and highlighting.

Isobel sat as still and patiently as she could, but it seemed an interminable time before Cal Ford raised his head, holding the pad out in front of him as he frowned over the finished work. 'Lucifer's right,' he admitted at last, 'I haven't done you justice.'

Lucifer took the drawing from him, his black eyes going from the original and back to the sketch, his expression impossible to interpret. 'It's good,' he declared at last. 'It's very good, you've captured that soft and lovely look to perfection. You always manage to get to the heart of your subject, don't you, Cal?'

'Do I?' Cal Ford looked rather surprised at the praise. 'I'm glad you're satisfied.'

'I am, thanks.' He detached the drawing from the pad and handed the pad back, rolling the sketch into a tube.

Cal Ford looked puzzled. 'It's for you?'

Lucifer nodded. 'Of course, who else?'

The narrow shoulders shrugged again. 'I thought it might be for Miss Hendrix herself. I remember doing a drawing once before at your request and you declined to have the finished thing then.' The rather sad eyes had an envious look. 'You said you didn't need a drawing when you had the original,' he added, and Isobel had no difficulty in guessing the identity of the subject.

Lucifer smiled, tapping the rolled drawing against his chin. 'This is different,' he said softly. 'I haven't got the original of this one - Nigel has.'

CHAPTER FOUR

LUCIFER had promised he would expect her to work extra hours to make up for the time they had spent at the show, and Isobel was not really surprised to find that he had meant it. In fact he kept her working late for the next week or more and she began to wonder if he intended making it a regular thing.

Nigel took her continued long hours as a personal affront and he made no secret of his resentment when Lucifer lunched with his grandmother again one Sunday. Isobel too, had been invited and she kept her eyes lowered discreetly when Nigel tackled his brother about her working late so often.

'You delight in disrupting people's lives, don't you?' he accused, and Lucifer smiled.

'I didn't know I was doing anything so dramatic,' he said. 'Disrupting people's lives is rather overdoing it, surely.'

'I don't think so,' Nigel argued. 'You know Isobel spends her free time with me and you're just damned selfish enough to keep her late every night because you know it upsets our plans.'

'I never even gave you a thought,' Lucifer admitted blandly.

'Exactly!' Nigel glared at him so hard that even Isobel found it difficult not to see how self-righteous it made him look.

'As for plans—' A black brow arched curiously. 'Come on, Nigel, you can't possibly go anywhere plastered up like that.'

'Lucifer!' Mrs. Grayson shook her head at him, but Isobel recognized the customary indulgence even in the reproach. 'Poor Nigel has enough to contend with-without you being so callous about it.'

'I'm not being callous,' Lucifer protested mildly. 'But where *can* he go trussed up like that? I've offered to take him out in the car to give him a change of air and environment, but he turned up his nose at the offer. He won't budge anywhere.'

'It's difficult,' the old lady told him, seeing his point of view as usual. 'Being driven when you're used to driving can't be much fun.'

'It isn't,' Nigel declared bluntly, 'Especially when he drives like a maniac in that ghastly little horror of his.'

'Like a maniac?' The black eyes turned appealingly to Isobel and her heart sank at the prospect of either lying or having to side with him against Nigel. 'Isobel, be honest now, do I drive like a maniac?'

She was very tempted to lie, but she knew she would never be able to while he watched her like that, so instead she did her best to compromise. 'You certainly drive very fast,' she said after a moment's hesitation, 'but - but you seem to have good control, so I suppose it's safe enough.'

His gaze mocked her reticence and she knew Nigel was even less pleased with her answer. 'There you are,' Lucifer told him. 'Grudging admission, but admission just the same.' He looked at his brother, his eyes wickedly black. 'One thing about my driving, old boy,' he added softly, 'at least I'm all in one piece, aren't I?'

'Oh, that was cruel!' Isobel objected, and even Nigel blinked at the vehemence of her protest, while Lucifer looked actually surprised, the first time she had ever seen such an expression on his face.

'It was unkind, Lucifer,' Mrs. Grayson told him.

'All right, all right!' He held up his hands as if in defence. 'I'm sorry I was cruel to poor Nigel and I'm sorry I kept poor Isobel from being with him. O.K.?'

'Of course.' It was the old lady who answered for them, only too ready to accept his apparently sincere apology. 'No one holds it against you, but you really shouldn't make Isobel work so hard and so late.'

'I don't think I do,' he argued, and Isobel saw the strong jaw set stubbornly. 'I know she works hard, but not *too* hard, and there may come a time when there's very little for her to do at all. She has to take the rough with the smooth, she knows that.' The black eyes flicked briefly to his brother before settling on Isobel, curious and a little puzzled. 'Has she been complaining to you?' he asked Nigel.

'No, of course she hasn't,' Nigel said, 'Isobel's a good worker, but—'

'Then why try to make her otherwise?' Lucifer interrupted.

'I have to agree with Nigel on that point, Lucifer,' Mrs. Grayson said, obviously reluctant to speak her mind. 'Just lately you've kept her very late and almost every night.'

Isobel noted the barely discernible tightening of his wide straight mouth as he looked at her. 'Everyone seems to think I treat you very badly, Isobel,' he said quietly, the dark eyes compelling her to look at him. 'Have *you* any complaints?'

She felt herself the target for three pairs of eyes, but it was Lucifer's that still held her gaze. 'No.' She shook her head. 'No, I don't mind having to work late. I - I knew I would have to sometimes.'

'But not all the time,' Nigel insisted, angry because she was not supporting him. 'I scarcely ever see you before half past eight in the evening now.'

'But it's not permanent, Nigel.' She sought to stem the temper she could see threatening. 'And I do spend every evening with you, which I never did in town.'

'I know you do, but that was the idea of having you here, so that I could see more of you.' The admission sent Lucifer's black brows swiftly upwards and brought a wicked glitter to his eyes.

'So in other words,' he said quietly, 'my need for a secretary was intended to play second fiddle to *your* need to have Isobel within easy reach. You wanted her here to soothe your fevered brow and my wants came a very poor second. Now I know why you talked me into taking her on as my secretary.'

'You knew all along,' Nigel retorted. 'And don't make it sound as if you were doing me a favour. You *did* need a secretary, and Isobel's a damned good one.'

'I agree,' Lucifer said, still far less disturbed by the argument than his brother. 'But she *is* working for me, and she's said she doesn't mind working late, so I don't see that you've much room for complaint.' A long hand reached out and covered one of Isobel's, the fingers curled firmly over hers. 'Don't you like working for me, Isobel?' he asked softly.

'Yes, yes, of course I do.' She hastily lowered her eyes against the reproach she saw in Nigel's. 'I'm quite happy,' she added, 'and it's very well paid.'

'You see?' His shoulders shrugged off any further discussion along those lines and the strong fingers tightened briefly over hers, as if in thanks. He was, she thought wildly, quite the most uncrushable man she'd ever met.

Whether he had been influenced after all by his family's remarks, Isobel did not know, but the next day Lucifer palled a halt to work much earlier than usual. She was not sorry at all for, despite her

protests that she did not mind working late, she felt she had been doing rather too much lately, although she would not have said so to Nigel for anything.

He saw her glance at her watch as she covered her typewriter and she looked at him sharply when he laughed. 'Respectable hours today for a change,' he remarked, and Isobel smiled.

'So Nigel's complaints *did* have some effect,' she said.

He shook his head, coming over to perch on the edge of her desk as he often did. 'None at all,' he denied. 'I don't allow myself to be influenced by anyone, it just happens to suit me to let you leave early today.'

'Oh, I see.'

He was watching her, his eyes glittering mischief as he reached out a hand and brushed back a stray wisp of hair from her neck. 'I expect you do see, *bella mia*,' he said softly. 'You realize who pays the piper and therefore calls the tune, don't you?'

Isobel moved away from him, hating the way her heart was thudding wildly against her ribs just because he touched her, *and* used that name he often called her, mostly when they were alone. 'I know you're entitled to call the tune, Lucifer, but I wish you wouldn't use Italian words I don't understand.'

'*Bella mia*?' He smiled obviously with no intention of enlightening her until it suited his purpose. 'Why does everyone call you by your full name? Haven't you a - a pet name?'

'No.' She overlooked a rather unflattering name she had been called as a baby, for it had never been carried over into adult life. 'I'm always called Isobel; and I prefer it that way.'

'Never Belle or Bella?'

'No, I don't like my name shortened, I prefer it as it is.'

'Well, you'll have to bear with me if my more flamboyant tastes lead me into error sometimes,' he told her solemnly. 'I think Bella suits you much better.'

'It's *not* my name.'

He smiled and her pulse quickened alarmingly. 'But it's so much more descriptive,' he said softly, and laughed when she frowned.

'It's extremely rude to use words you know I don't understand,' she objected.

'Ah, but knowing you, *piccola*. you'd probably take even more exception if you *did* understand,' he told her. 'You're such a proper little creature, aren't you?' He lifted her chin with one hand and spoke so close to her mouth that his breath was warm on her lips. '*Bella*,' he said softly, and in a gentle, liquid accent that did crazy things to her pulse. '*Bella, bella, bella*.'

'Please don't!' She brushed away his hand and turned her face away, clasping her hands tightly to stop them trembling.

'Don't you want to know what it means?' he teased, and she shook her head.

'I don't suppose you've the slightest intention of telling me,' she said, trying hard to ignore the watching eyes. 'And I'm not sure I want to know anyway.'

'But I'd love to tell you, if I can be sure you won't take offence in your funny puritan little way and slap my face for paying you a compliment.'

'I am not puritan,' Isobel objected indignantly. 'How can you say that?' She looked down at the papers on her desk unseeingly. 'Besides,' she confessed cautiously, 'I - I think I have some idea what it means.'

'Of course you have,' he told her, and she felt sure he was laughing at her although she dared not look at him to make sure. 'It means pretty and beautiful, everything that describe you so perfectly, *bella mia*.' He spoke softly and, almost unwillingly, she turned her head and looked at him. 'You're well named, little Bella.'

'I'm not named Bella, I'm Isobel,' she insisted, her voice barely under control.

'To me you're—' He shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands, deliberately Italian, she suspected. '*Bella mia*.'

'I do know what *mia* means, Lucifer, and that definitely doesn't apply.' She busied herself in an attempt to restore normality, tidying her desk as best she could for his being seated on it, then she picked up her handbag, ready to go. 'Now,' she told him meeting his eyes with difficulty, 'if there's nothing else, I'll go.'

The black eyes mocked her. 'Go by all means,' he said, and leaned forward as she brushed past him on her way out. '*Ciao, bella mia*.'

It was no time to stay and argue the rights and wrongs of anything, she decided, and instead walked to the door and out into the tiny hall. She was just in time to see the front door open and a woman come in. She made her entrance with all the self-confidence of a regular visitor and Isobel felt her hands tighten involuntarily when she realized who

the caller must be, and why she had been) allowed to leave so early today.

Despite Nigel's rather lurid description of Vanessa Law, Isobel was not prepared for quite such a striking appearance, and she felt a strange chill of uneasiness when the odd, almost yellow eyes looked at her coolly.

She was several inches taller than Isobel and thin as a lath with jet black hair piled on top of her head in a style that should have been much too severe for her sharp features but which, in fact, added in some odd way to her exotic looks. Even on this bright and sunny August day she wore a very dark dress, Isobel could not be sure of its actual colour in the shady hallway, which made her appear even taller.

'Good evening.' Some gesture of acknowledgment was called for, Isobel thought, and she tried a half-smile.

Whether the other woman would have answered or not was open to discussion, but almost at once Lucifer came out into the hall and took charge of the situation with his usual aplomb. 'I thought it might be you,' he told the visitor. 'You're early.'

As a welcome it could have been said to lack warmth and her mouth, surprisingly full-lipped in the thin face, pouted reproach before she tip-toed and kissed him. 'Flattering as ever,' she said. 'You *are* a brute, Lucifer.'

He ignored the reproach and turned to smile at Isobel, already part way out of the front door. 'Van, this is Isobel Hendrix; Isobel - Vanessa Law.'

Isobel proffered a hand, ready to be sociable although a shiver ran through her, which she firmly quelled, when the odd, catlike eyes

swept over her insolently. 'Miss Law,' she murmured, not noticing until it was too late the wide gold ring on the other's left hand.

Her proffered hand was ignored and instead a brief nod of the black head acknowledged her existence reluctantly. 'Mrs. Law,' she corrected her coolly, and looked up at Lucifer suspiciously. 'Someone said you had a new secretary,' she said, and made it sound like an accusation.

'News gets around.' He acknowledged the fact with a smile. 'It's amazing, isn't it?' The look he gave her told her plainly enough that he guessed Cal Ford to be her informer. 'Especially after the County Show.'

'Cal told me,' she informed him defiantly.

'Of course.' Isobel felt horribly superfluous standing there, but it would be difficult to just leave without saying anything further.

'*You* didn't say anything,' Vanessa Law accused, and Lucifer smiled.

'I saw no reason to tell you that I had a new secretary,' he told her. 'My business arrangements don't usually concern you, I didn't see why Isobel's arrival should.' That, Isobel thought, with sudden and startling insight, was completely untrue. He had not only known that Vanessa Law would hate the idea of her being there but put in a hasty appearance when he heard the two of them together in the hall.

'If you needed a new secretary,' Vanessa told him, the cat-like eyes sweeping over Isobel chillingly, 'I could have found you a much more suitable one if you'd told me.'

'More suitable?' Such innocence *had* to be assumed, and Vanessa Law recognized it too and frowned.

'You should have had someone older like Mrs. Lomas,' she informed him shortly. 'This one's far too young.'

She would not, Isobel thought, even give her the benefit of a name and she looked at Lucifer, wondering what his reaction would be. 'There's no law against young secretaries that I know of,' he told her quietly, 'and Isobel's very efficient.'

'Hmm.' Vanessa could see the argument already slipping away from her and decided to make the best of whatever power she had over him. She pushed an arm through his and looked up at him, her mouth pouted in reproach. 'I wasn't aware that efficiency interested you to that extent,' she told him, 'but if it does, I'm very efficient too, aren't I, darling?'

'Very,' he agreed amiably and with a smile that recognized surrender. 'Vanessa,' he explained for Isobel's benefit, 'runs a very prosperous antique business in town.'

'I know,' Isobel said. 'Nigel told me.'

The yellow-coloured eyes narrowed. 'Nigel?' she queried, looking to Lucifer for explanation.

'Isobel,' Lucifer explained, 'used to work for Frome's, Nigel's firm.'

'Oh, I see.'

Lucifer laughed, evidently enjoying the situation. 'I'll bet you don't,' he declared. 'Isobel caught the directorial eye while she was there and, since he's been laid up after his crash, he's been pining for her so much that he talked me into taking her on as my secretary.'

Isobel flushed, looking at him with reproachful eyes. 'You weren't obliged to take me on, Mr. Bennetti,' she told him. 'I wasn't desperate for work. I already had a perfectly good job at Frome's.'

'Oh, I don't regret taking you on,' he said, his grin taunting her for her touchiness. 'As I said, you're very efficient and you're much, much prettier than Tottie Lomas.'

The latter definitely did not please Vanessa Law, and she pursed her full lips doubtfully. 'What happened to Lomas?' she asked. 'Why did you get rid of her, Lucifer?'

Lucifer shrugged. 'I didn't, she left.'

'She left?' She looked as if she found that hard to believe. 'But why?'

'If it matters,' he informed her with a grin, 'she said she'd had enough of me. She couldn't stand the pace.' He looked at Isobel and smiled. 'It gets pretty hectic at times, doesn't it, Isobel?'

'At times,' she agreed, feeling uneasy each time those strange eyes came in her direction.

'Despite her fairy-tale princess looks,' Lucifer went on, making-things worse, 'I think Isobel's made of sterner stuff, aren't you, *bella mia*?'

Why, oh, why, Isobel thought wildly when she saw the other woman frown, did he have to use that endearment when Vanessa Law was there? It was just about the most indiscreet thing he could have done, and Isobel felt a sudden, urgent desire to flee, to run as far away from there as fast as her legs would take her. There was something about Vanessa Law that gave her a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach and she wondered why Lucifer did not realize it and behave more discreetly. Except, of course, that it was the sort of situation he would probably enjoy.

'If - if you'll excuse me,' she said, glancing at her watch, 'I'll go now. Nigel's expecting me as soon as I've had dinner.' She closed the door

hastily behind her and hurried away, trying not to hear the cool hard voice of Vanessa Law raised in protest as she went.

'Lucifer, she's too young, get rid of her.'

Gradually Nigel was getting about a little more each day, although he had still to take care and not overdo the time he was on his feet, and it would be a long time yet before he was completely fit again. It was the cool of the evening and the last of the red summer sun gave a curiously unreal look to the soft green hills and the toy village of stone cottages tucked away in their shelter.

The garden sloped a little at the very end and from there it overlooked a scene so beautiful it was breathtaking, a scene Isobel felt she would never tire of. She walked slowly beside Nigel as he bobbed along on crutches, breathing heavily from the exertion.

'Am I going too fast?' she asked, and he shook his head.

'No, no, I'm fine, thanks, even though I am puffing like an old man.'

'If you'd use that wheelchair,' Isobel told him for the umpteenth time, 'I could push you and save you all this exertion.'

'Well, I won't.' He looked stubborn. 'I refuse to be pushed about like a baby in a pram or an old grandpa. I'll go under my own steam or not at all.'

Isobel smiled. 'All right, obstinate, but don't say I didn't offer.'

He leaned forward, awkwardly because of the crutches, and kissed her cheek. 'I know I'm stubborn, darling, but I hate being dependent on anyone at all, and most of all you.'

'Why most of all me?' she asked.

'Because you're special. I want to do things for you, not the other way round.'

'You do do things for me,' she laughed. 'And it works both ways, you know. I like to do things for you too.'

He stopped, perching rather precariously on a low wall. 'Let's take a breather,' he suggested. 'I'm sure it's further to the end of the garden now than it used to be.' He took her hands and pulled her down beside him and Isobel felt her blood stirring uneasily at what she saw so unmistakably in his eyes. 'You *are* special, you know,' he told her softly. 'You're very, very special, Isobel.'

She shook her head, uncertain if she wanted him to be so serious. With Nigel there would be no light-hearted flirting, as with Lucifer; Nigel was much too serious about everything to indulge in anything so frivolous.

'I'm just a girl,' she told him lightly. 'A moderately good secretary and fairly good-looking, so I've been told, nothing so special.'

'You are to me.' He leaned across and kissed her mouth, his blue eyes looking incredibly dark, almost as black as Lucifer's in the red light of the dying sun. 'You're beautiful, Isobel, you're beautiful, my darling.'

His choice of words again reminded her of Lucifer and she hastily dismissed the memory of that idiotic discussion about her name. 'You're very flattering,' she told him, smiling gently, for Nigel would be easy to hurt, she thought. She brushed a fall of hair from his forehead, sensing him far less sure of himself than she had ever known him and wondering at the change. The self-sufficient business executive apparently had quite a lot of the schoolboy in him still and at the moment he looked a lot less than the twenty-nine years he claimed.

'I'm not being flattering at all,' he declared. 'You *are* beautiful and I'm more than half in love with you already. A few more days in this witching country with you and I'll be completely under your spell.'

The words reminded her of Vanessa Law and she shook off the scene they recreated, smiling to take the edge off her words. 'I don't want you to fall in love with me,' she told him, and saw him frown suspiciously. 'I - I want to be fancy-free for quite a few more years yet and see something of the world.'

'You're not thinking of leaving me?' he asked, and she shook her head.

'Not yet awhile,' she denied. 'But I don't want to be tied down anywhere yet, it's too early.'

He sighed, lifting her hands to his lips in an unexpectedly romantic gesture. 'I suppose I'm being selfish,' he allowed. 'You're very young and I've never quite realized it tin til now. How old are you, Isobel?'

She remembered Vanessa Law's last words as she walked away from Lucifer's cottage earlier, telling him that she was too young to be his secretary, and wondered why Nigel too had raised the question of her age.

She pulled a face at him. 'That's not a question a gentleman would ask,' she said. 'And you of all people should *know* how old I am. You interviewed me, or have you forgotten?'

'No, of course I haven't forgotten.' He frowned in thought for a moment. 'Let me see, you came to us straight from school, didn't you?'

'Secretarial college,' she corrected him, and laughed at his concentration. 'That was four years ago,' she prompted, 'and I was eighteen then, so you work it out from there.'

'Is it possible it's four years ago?' he asked. 'I remember it very well, actually, but it doesn't seem so long ago as that. I remember I thought you were an enchanting little creature, even then, and I grudged old Pogson having you for his secretary.'

'He frightened me to death,' Isobel confessed laughingly. 'And so did you, that first day.'

'But not now.'

'Oh no, not now.'

'I'd hate to think you looked on me as as ogre of a boss, even if I am a bit stuffy at times, and I am, aren't I?'

'No, not stuffy,' she denied. 'Just serious.'

His eyes studied her closely in the fading light, and she thought he had been reminded of something. 'Luke's never stuffy, I suppose, is he?' he asked at last, and Isobel hesitated before she answered.

'No, he's never stuffy, but then he's seldom serious either.'

'Hmmm. He let you leave at a reasonable hour tonight,' he said. 'Did you demand to go or did he have a change of heart?'

'Neither - he had a date.'

'Oh? That early?' He was obviously curious and Isobel was nothing loath to enlighten him as they started walking again, down towards the grassy slope at the end of the garden.

'I met Vanessa Law as I came out,' she told him. 'Mrs. Law, although you'd omitted to tell me that.'

'Sorry. Did you call her Miss?'

'I did, and was put firmly in my place for my pains. I - I don't think she liked me very much.'

He glanced at her face and shrugged as best he could for the impeding crutches. 'She wouldn't,' he stated bluntly.

'She's very striking, isn't she?'

'Very,' Nigel agreed wryly. 'How did she strike you?' . "You told me she gave you the creeps,' Isobel reminded him, 'and I'm inclined to agree with you. I felt cold shivers all over me when she looked at me. She really is a remarkable-looking woman and those - those strange-looking eyes have to be seen to be believed.'

'They *are* yellow, aren't they?'

Isobel nodded. 'Although they're more amber than actual yellow, I suppose, to be honest.' She smiled ruefully. 'The temptation to liken her to a witch, knowing what I know about her, is almost irresistible.'

'Isn't it, though?'

'The last thing I heard her saying as I came away from the house,' Isobel told him, 'was that Lucifer should get rid of me because I was too young.' Try as she would to conceal it there was an edge of anxiety on her voice when she asked the question. 'Will he, do you think?'

Nigel shook his head. 'Not Luke,' he said with certainty. 'Especially if Vanessa was issuing orders, as she has a habit of doing. I thought she would have known him well enough by now, he digs his heels in hard if there's any suggestion of being *told* to do anything. He's a terrible autocrat, he always was even as a boy. I suppose he gets it from his father.'

Isobel could not disguise her interest, no matter how she tried. 'Was he an autocrat?' she asked.

'So I understand,' Nigel said, and pulled a face. 'I suppose he still is. Count Giulio Giovanni Giuseppe Bennetti of the Palazzo Bennetti, Rome. Does that answer your question?'

Isobel laughed. 'No wonder Lucifer has such illusions of grandeur,' she said. 'I suppose they're not really illusions, are they? Does he ever see his father?' she added, her curiosity thoroughly aroused, and Nigel laughed shortly.

'Not lately,' he told her. 'The last I heard there was a new and very beautiful young Contessa and - like father^ like son. Papa Bennetti's not likely to put his young Contessa in the way of temptation by asking Luke to visit.'

'No,' Isobel admitted thoughtfully. 'I can see he wouldn't if he's a wise man.'

'I don't know about wise,' Nigel demurred, 'but he must be quite an old man by now.'

'Oh, really? I hadn't realized that. The Count was your - your mother's first husband, wasn't he?'

'Yes.' He frowned as he always did when he was reminded that his father had not been first. 'Gran knows all the sordid details, of course, and I've heard them at various times through the years. Mother eloped with Bennetti when she was only seventeen and he was nearly thirty. Luke was born less than a year later and the whole thing only lasted about five years, then she divorced him and married my father.'

'Mrs. Grayson was telling me about your father,' Isobel said, seeking a more popular subject. 'Apparently Andy Frome was a big name in motor-racing at one time, although it was before my time, of course.'

'He was a very big name,' Nigel agreed, with a note of pride for the father he could scarcely have known. 'He was shrewd enough to think of his family's future too and he started Frome Engineering as a sort of insurance for when he retired. The only trouble was he didn't live long enough to retire.'

'It was a chance he took in his profession,' Isobel said softly. 'I expect he knew that and left the firm for you when you were old enough.'

'Yes.' He sighed. 'I would rather have liked to have known him a bit better, though.' He sat down gratefully on a rough wooden seat under a tree, his eyes on the distant hills that were rapidly disappearing in the dying light. 'I sometimes wish I'd had the nerve to follow in his footsteps,' he said slowly, 'but as you see, I can't even handle an ordinary, everyday car without bashing it and myself to pieces.'

'Not quite to pieces,' Isobel smiled. 'You're getting on famously now, Nigel, aren't you?'

'I feel a lot better,' he agreed, and reached for her hands as she sat down beside him. 'That's largely due to having you here,' he told her. 'It was a stroke of genius on my part, getting you that job with Luke.'

'Yes, yes, it was.' She too gazed out at the fast disappearing hills, watching the colour of the sky change from red to purple, and not for anything would she have let him know the brief thought that popped into her head and was hastily dismissed. The thought that evidently he shared none of Count Bennetti's qualms about trusting her in close proximity to Lucifer.

CHAPTER FIVE

ISOBEL was thinking one evening of her dinner. It was quite early and it would be some time yet before she was allowed to leave, but it had seemed such a long day today and she would be very glad of the half hour or so of relaxation that would follow her meal, before she was expected to go over to the house and see Nigel.

It had been so sultry all day, not pleasantly warm but heavy and oppressive and, even with the windows wide open, the room seemed close and airless. She finished the page she was typing and looked across hopefully at Lucifer, disconcerted to find him watching her.

'Have you had enough for today?' he asked, running a hand through his hair, and Isobel nodded.

'It's so terribly hot,' she complained, 'and there seems to be not a breath of air anywhere.'

He stretched lazily. 'It'll probably thunder before the night's out,' he guessed. 'It feels like it.'

'Don't you *know*?' she asked, remembering his claim to have ordered the fine weather especially for the County Show.

'Not this time,' he admitted. 'But I'm pretty sure we're in for a storm.'

Isobel shuddered. She knew she was an abject coward and frankly admitted it, but thunderstorms had always terrified her ever since she was a child, and no amount of logical explanations made a scrap of difference. Not that she made an exhibition of herself if there were other people around, but if she was alone she always hid her head and let her shaking limbs have their way.

'I hope you're wrong,' she told him.

He cocked a black brow at her curiously. "You're not scared of thunderstorms, are you?"

Isobel hesitated before admitting it. "Yes, as a matter of fact I am. Oh, don't worry," she added hastily, "I don't go berserk or make a fool of myself, not when anyone's around to see me anyway."

"But you don't like it when you're alone?"

"I'm petrified, an absolute coward."

Surprisingly he seemed more interested than scornful as she had expected him to be, and he leaned back in his chair to catch what breeze there was from the open window behind him. "Why?" he asked. "I mean what actually frightens you?"

She shrugged, looking a little shamefaced for having admitted it. "I don't know, I wish I did, then perhaps I could do something about it."

"What do you do when you're alone?"

She pulled a wry face. "Hide my head."

"Under the pillows?"

"Anywhere that shuts out the noise and the flashes of lightning. I told you, I'm a dreadful coward."

"Oh well," he cast a speculative eye at the brassy sky outside, "let's hope it keeps fine for you."

She echoed the hope fervently and picked up paper and carbon to start another page. "It may not come to anything," she said.

'I thought we agreed we'd finished for today,' he said, getting up and coming to perch, inevitably, on her desk. 'Take that paper out again and pack up, it's much too hot to work.'

Isobel glanced at her watch. 'It's rather early,' she said, willing to be persuaded, and he laughed.

'You're a glutton for work, aren't you?' he asked. 'I'm surprised Nigel wanted to part with you.'

'Well, he didn't exactly part with me, did he?' she asked.

He pulled a wry face at her. 'No, the crafty so-and-so pulled a fast one there. He wanted his cake and eat it too.' The black eyes twinkled wickedly. 'Not that I blame him in the least, it's *very* nice cake.'

'That wasn't his only reason for getting me here,' she protested. 'You wanted a secretary, after all. You'd driven the last poor woman half out of her mind. Besides,' she added practically, 'this is very much better paid.'

'Little mercenary,' he teased. 'Is that the only reason you came?'

She looked at him for a moment. 'The main one,' she said at last. 'Although I like being near Nigel, of course.'

'Of course,' he echoed. 'But you realize that he'll expect you to go back to Frome's when he does, don't you?'

It was something that had often crossed her mind since she had been there. What would happen when Nigel was well enough to return to London himself, whether he would expect Isobel to go too. Almost certainly he would, she thought, and wondered if she was prepared to go when she had so much to give up. Not only was her salary considerably more, but she also had the little cottage to herself and at far less rent than she had been paying for her rooms in London.

'I - I don't think he will,' she denied, so obviously not believing it that he laughed.

'You know damn well he will,' he told her, and arched a brow in query, a query she forestalled.

'Well - well, maybe he will,' she allowed hastily. 'But it's logical really, I suppose.'

He was still, she saw, going to ask her. 'Will you go, Isobel?'

It was a difficult question to answer at any time and particularly so with that black-eyed gaze seeming to look right into her. 'I - I don't know.' 'Ah, I suppose it depends,' he said mockingly, as if he guessed her reasons for hesitating.

She lifted her chin, her eyes glistening darkly. 'It *would* depend,' she told him.

'On what else he offers?'

The jibe angered her and she clenched her hands on the papers she was tidying. 'I don't know what you mean by that,' she said, 'but I don't like the way you said it.'

'Sorry about that, but you do know what I meant, don't you?'

'No, I don't.'

'Oh, come on,' he said. "You know he's goo-eyed over you.'

'That's not-'

'He might marry you,' he guessed, giving her no time to finish her protest. 'In fact I'm pretty sure he's serious about you.'

'Which is more than you ever are about anything,' Isobel retorted.

He laughed. 'You don't know me well enough to make a crack like that, *bella mia*, now do you?'

She made no immediate answer, but was forced to recognize the truth of the accusation. Considering she spent so much of her time in his company she knew really very little about him except what Nigel had told her, and she doubted if she ever would. He was as enigmatic and elusive as his notorious namesake.

'No, I suppose not,' she admitted at last as she put the cover on her typewriter and picked up her handbag. 'It's hot,' she complained, 'and I feel crotchety.'

'That's painfully obvious.' He got up from her desk and held up a hand when she would have retorted. 'I suggest we go and find ourselves a breeze,' he said. 'Blow ourselves back into sanity with a long fast drive.'

'But—'

'But me no buts,' he told her. 'We'll drive out as far as Reeve's Beacon and back.'

'It would be lovely and cool,' Isobel said wistfully.

'Then why are you arguing?'

'I—I'm not—I'll let Ni—'

"You'll do no such thing," he retorted, taking her firmly by the arm. 'You're not tied to Nigel's apron strings and you don't have to report every move you make to him, so come on.'

'You are a *bully*,' she told him a little breathlessly as they left the cottage and walked out to his car. 'An absolute bully!'

'I also eat pretty blondes for breakfast,' he informed her, and leered horribly as he half pushed her into the car.

Isobel looked at him loftily. 'I can believe it,' she retorted.

It was beautifully cool driving along and, despite Nigel's scornful reference to his maniacal driving, Isobel had no qualms at all for her own safety. He was a skilful driver, the strong brown hands firmly in control and taking no chances although they were travelling fast to create a breeze. The lanes were quiet and there seemed no other traffic about at all. She had little time to notice the countryside flying past, but sightseeing was not the object of their journey, just the creation of a cool breeze, and she leaned back her head and half-closed her eyes to make the most of it.

'Have you ever been to Reeve's Beacon?' he asked unexpectedly, and grinned at her barely concealed start.

'No, no, I've been nowhere except into .Greenlaw and to the County Show with you.' She turned her head and looked at him lazily from under her lashes. 'What *is* Reeve's Beacon?'

He smiled. 'Exactly what it says it is - a beacon. One of those fire-places you find dotted over the landscape, the original telephone service, I suppose.'

The idea amused her and she laughed lazily. 'You're quite funny, aren't you?'

'Am I?' He briefly turned his head and grinned at her.

'I mean funny ha-ha, not funny peculiar,' Isobel explained and added, almost without thinking, 'Nigel scarcely ever laughs.'

He smiled, his eyes on the road ahead. 'He always was a bit of a sobersides,' he told her. 'That's probably why he thinks I'm mad.'

'Does he think you're mad?'

'Of course, hasn't he told you?' Another brief grin over his shoulder gave lie to the assertion. 'It's because I'm not one hundred per cent British,' he explained solemnly. 'You know the idea - all foreigners are a bit mad.'

'Do foreigners include Scots?' Isobel asked, and he nodded.

'Of course. Why? Are you one?'

'I'm afraid so.'

He shook his head solemnly over the information, lips pursed. 'Then I'm afraid your girlish dreams won't materialize, *cara mia*. No wedding bells for you.'

'I wish you'd stop harping on wedding bells,' Isobel objected. 'What about you hearing them first - you're a great deal older than me.'

'And you're sassy,' he retorted. 'You treat your elders with respect, my girl, or you'll be in trouble.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You needn't go that far, for heaven's sake!'

'Well, you *are* nearly old enough to be my—'

'If you say it,' he warned, 'I'll tip you out, so help me!'

'Well, you *are*,' Isobel insisted, thoroughly enjoying the situation.

'Damn you, stop it, will you!'

'You started it.'

He sighed resignedly. 'So I did,' he admitted, 'but even I wasn't precocious enough at thirteen and three months and two days to have fathered you.'

She looked at him a second in silence. 'You're very precise,' she said, sounding a little breathless and wishing there was something she could do about her heartbeat. 7 didn't know it was that much.'

'I like to keep the record straight.' He turned and grinned at her and she found herself smiling in return, a warm glow of intimacy adding to the sun's warmth. 'Anyway,' he added, 'it was your wedding bells we were talking about, not mine. I'm not the marrying sort.'

'What makes you think that I am?' Isobel asked, and he shook his head, his mouth smiling, although he did not turn his head again.

'Oh yes, *bella mia*,' he told her softly. You must marry some time, you're too beautiful to be allowed to remain alone all your life.'

'Well, I don't know who told you that I'm going to marry Nigel,' she said, determined not to be defeated. 'The subject has never even been raised between us.'

'Yet,' he added briefly, and Isobel frowned.

'I've no intention of marrying anyone for a long time yet,' she told him. 'Nigel knows that.'

'He's not a patient man.'

'For heaven's sake, Lucifer, he hasn't even *asked* me. There's nothing as serious between us as you seem to think',' she added.

'But there soon will be.'

He sounded so sure that she looked at him for a moment in silence, then she shook her head, smiling knowingly. 'If you're trying to impress me with your powers as a forecaster,' she told him at last, 'you forget you've already told me how it's done.'

'Have I?'

'Mmm. It's all done by psychology, according to you. You watch for a word that triggers a reaction, then take it from there.'

'You catch on quick, don't you? But how do you think I managed it in this case?' he asked. 'I've not seen Nigel for more than five minutes together unless someone else has been there, and we've certainly not discussed his feelings for you.'

'Then it's probably guesswork,' Isobel retorted.

He shook his head and grinned. 'Nope, you're wrong, this time it's genuine seeing-eye stuff. Nigel's going to ask you to marry him much sooner than you expect.'

She stared at him, suddenly uneasy. 'I - I don't see how you can possibly know that,' she told him, and added, 'and why are you so interested anyway?'

'I'm more interested in what your answer will be,' he confessed.

She was quiet again or a bit, thoughtful too, for she did not even know herself what her answer would be. 'I'd need to think about it,' she told him at last. 'I'd need to think about it a lot.'

'I hope you will,' he said quietly. 'I'd hate to see you make a mistake, *cara mia*.'

Reever's Beacon itself proved not very exciting at all, but the view from the top of the hill was enchanting and it was so beautifully cool. It was not grand-looking countryside, but pretty and mellow, with little stone villages cuddled up in the rich old trees that both sheltered and guarded and looked as if they had been there for ever. Some ancient Cotswold farm-girl could have looked out at exactly this same scene, unchanged except for the occasional glinting car windscreen over on the main road.

They sat, part way down the slope of the hill, and watched the dark grey threat of clouds roll over the hills and down between them like a gathering frown, and Isobel shivered at the prospect of their arrival. The air was heavy with the gathering storm and she knew that before nightfall it would break and send her, coward-like, to hide her head. Unless by some chance it came before' she left Nigel, and then it would not be so bad. It was never so bad when she was with someone.

'Here comes your storm,' Lucifer told her, and turned to smile at her.

'I don't think it's funny,' Isobel said. 'Certainly not if it breaks while we're up here in the open.'

He grinned widely, his dishevelled hair giving him an even more satanic look than usual. 'You can hide your head on my shoulder,' he promised. 'I shan't mind.'

'Well, I shall.' She glanced at the clouds again. 'Shouldn't we go back, Lucifer, just in case it catches us here? We've no coats.'

'We shan't need coats,' he told her, and sounded absolutely confident of the fact. 'It won't get here yet. It won't reach us for another three or four hours yet.'

'How do you know?'

He shrugged, grinning at her, mocking her fears. 'I *know*,' he said.

Isobel hugged her knees, shoulders hunched impatiently. 'Oh, you *know*,' she echoed. 'You know so many things in advance, don't you? Sometimes I think you really *are*—'

She bit her lip on the preposterous suggestion she had almost given voice to, and he turned his head and looked at her, one black brow lifted high into the thick fall of hair on his forehead, his eyes glittering darkly in the brassy sunlight as if he knew exactly what she had been going to say. 'I am?' he prompted. 'What am I, *piccola*?'

'Oh, nothing!' She shook her head, refusing to look at him. It was so nonsensical it should never have entered her head in the first place, and yet here; on this ageless, quiet hillside, with those black eyes watching her, she could believe almost anything possible. 'Lucifer, let's go back, please.'

'Why?'

Almost any other man would have complied with her plea, been anxious to please, but he merely watched her as if he had no intention of moving until he was good and ready. She flicked him an appealing look, her eyes wide and darkly grey, glancing away again hastily when her heart set up a rapid, almost panicky beating that she felt must surely be audible.

Broad shoulders hunched slightly to support the arms curled about his knees, the strong brown throat and chest dark against the whiteness of his shirt, open to the waist to catch the sparse breeze, there was something so right, so disturbingly right about him in this ancient place, that she felt herself not only alien but afraid.

'Please, Lucifer!'

'What's the matter with you?' he asked, and she shook her head hastily to deny it.

'Nothing's the matter with me, I just - I just think we should go, that's all.'

'That's *not* all,' he retorted. 'Isobel, what is it?'

She sought to steady her voice, her throat feeling dry and parched. 'I - I don't know.' She attempted a laugh, but it failed miserably. 'It's the storm, I suppose, I've got the heebie-jeebies.'

A finger touched her arm gently and traced a long line down to her wrist. 'So you have,' he allowed, 'though I can't think why.'

She shivered involuntarily at his touch. 'I told you - it's in - the storm.'

'*Just* the storm?'

'Yes, of course. What else?'

He took her chin in one hand and turned her, reluctant, to face him. 'Me?' he suggested softly. 'Or perhaps old Reeve's spirit?'

'Oh, Lucifer, don't!' She bit her lip. 'I'm sorry, I'm being stupid, but—'

'I'm sorry.'

The apology was so unexpected that she looked at him for a moment in disbelief. 'Why should you be?' she asked. 'I'm just being silly. There's such an atmosphere up here, isn't there?'

'Yes, I suppose there is,' he allowed, 'and you're obviously susceptible to it.'

'Can we go home - please?'

He looked at her for a moment in silence, still holding her chin in his hand, then he leaned forward and kissed her lightly on her mouth. 'If you want to,' he said.

'I do.'

He got to his feet and reached down for her hands. 'Your wish is my command,' he told her, and she shook her head.

'It's nothing of the sort,' she argued as he pulled her to her feet. 'You just don't want to get wet when that storm breaks.'

'You cheeky infant,' he retorted, and held her hand tightly to pull her up the hill after him.

Instead of being earlier, Isobel was even later than usual that evening going over to see Nigel, and his frown conveyed his displeasure almost as soon as she came into the room. 'It's time Luke gave you an early day,' he told her shortly, and she was tempted to keep silent about her drive to Reeve's Beacon with Lucifer. She would have done too, but there was little point in her trying to keep it secret if Lucifer told him about it, and he almost certainly would. That would inevitably lead to suspicion on Nigel's part if their stories conflicted.

'Actually I did leave early today,' she told him. 'It was much too hot to work.'

'It's murder,' he allowed. 'But you've been a long time coming over here, if you left early.'

'I - we went for a drive to cool off.'

His eyes narrowed suspiciously and Isobel's heart sank at the sight of it. 'You and Luke?'

'Yes. We went as far as Reeve's Beacon.'

'Why all out there?' Nigel demanded.

'I told you, to cool off, it's been terribly hot in the office all day and it was lovely and cool in the open car.'

'I've no doubt,' he said acidly. 'It wasn't, very lovely stuck here with all this plaster on my leg.'

'Nigel, I 'm sorry.' She wished she felt more sympathetic and less impatient as she sat beside him on a low chair. 'I did need some air after being cooped up in that room all day, and the offer was too tempting to refuse.'

'I can imagine.'

'You surely don't object to my going for a drive for an hour, do you?' she asked, looking at him dubiously. 'That *would* be unreasonable, Nigel.'

He shrugged, reluctantly agreeing. 'Yes, I suppose it would,' he allowed. 'It's this ghastly heat, I feel terrible.'

'I expect you do.' She was' more easily sympathetic now. 'I wish there was something I could do to help, I always feel so helpless.'

'Will you walk down to the end of the garden with me.'

'Yes, of course. It should be much cooler down there.'

She helped him up from his chair and handed him the walking-sticks which now took the place of the crutches he formerly needed, following him out of the french window and out on to the lawn. 'It's better already,' he said, 'although it's hot work humping along on these things.'

'But much better than the crutches,' Isobel said, determinedly cheerful despite his grumbles. 'You've done wonderfully well in the last few weeks, Nigel. At least walking-sticks are a step in the right direction, aren't they?'

'It takes so damned long,' Nigel complained. 'It seems like years since I walked properly on my own two feet.'

'Patience,' Isobel quoted wryly, 'is a virtue.'

'It's one I don't possess,' Nigel retorted.

She smiled, pulling a rueful face at him. 'I had noticed,' she chided him gently, and he shook his head.

'I'm sorry, darling, I shouldn't take it out on you. Please forgive me.'

'It's this blessed storm brewing up,' Isobel said. 'It makes everyone edgy, I'll be glad when it breaks - in a way,' she added hastily.

'It might pass us by, it does sometimes.'

Isobel shook her head. 'According to Lucifer,' she told him, 'it should reach us about nine o'clock tonight.'

'Huh!' He snorted disgust at the opinion. 'How would he know?'

'He seems pretty sure of himself,' Isobel said. 'We'll have to wait and see how right he is.'

'He's always so blessed sure of himself,' Nigel declared, reminded of her absence earlier. 'I don't suppose he gave you much option about going with him in the car, did he?' Her expression was confirmation enough and he scowled as he hobbled slowly along. 'One of these days,' he promised darkly, 'he'll come such a cropper and I, for

one, shan't weep over him.'

'Considering your opinion of him,' Isobel ventured, 'I'm- rather surprised that you want me to work for him.'

'I don't especially,' Nigel confessed. 'But I want you here where I can see you more often, and I know you have more sense than to fall for *his* line of smooth talk.'

'I think I'm flattered,' she told him wryly, and instinctively put a finger to her lips where Lucifer had kissed her.

He flicked her a brief glance, as if he suspected sarcasm. •You're much too intelligent to let Luke's continental smarm fool you,' he told her. 'I know you, Isobel. Anyway,' he added, as if it solved everything, 'he's too old for you.'

Thirteen years, three months and two days, Isobel thought, and immediately dismissed the thought. She walked along slowly beside him, seeking a safer subject than Lucifer. 'Shall we sit down?' she asked.

They had reached the end of the garden where the bank sloped away and what breeze there was blew sulkily in over the valley and barely stirred the trees. The air was as heavy as lead and the evening sky a dull metallic gold and grey that leaned weightily on the hills.

Nigel sat down with a sigh of relief, putting the sticks down beside him on the seat. 'God, it's awful,' he said. 'Just look at that sky, it's almost touching, it's so heavy.'

'It looks awe-inspiring from here,' Isobel said. 'Almost beautiful in a way.'

'I don't call *that* beautiful,' he denied. 'It's threatening and ugly.' He took her hands in his and smiled down at her, hazily fair in the fading

light, her grey eyes big and lustrous. 'You're what I call beautiful,' he said softly. "You're very beautiful, darling Isobel."

'Nigel—' She would have protested, but he kissed her and very effectively silenced her.

'I warned you I was half in love with you the other day,' he reminded her. 'Well, now I'm completely in love with you. Do you mind?'

She did not know quite what to say to him, hearing Lucifer's voice plain in her mind warning her. 'I'd hate to see you make a mistake, *cara mia*.' She was convinced that she was not yet in love with Nigel, although she thought she might easily be before much longer, and she felt enough for him now, not to want to hurt him.

'I - I don't know, Nigel,' she said. 'I told you that I don't want to be serious about anyone yet. I don't want to commit myself to a promise I may regret.'

He put a gentle hand to touch her face, his smile unexpectedly understanding. 'You're so young,' he told her softly. 'I mustn't hurry you, but I'm here when you make up your mind, Isobel. Remember that, won't you?'

'I'll remember it,' she promised, feeling ridiculously tearful for some reason she could not have explained. 'And - and I'm very touched, Nigel, honestly I am.'

'You're adorable,' he told her, his hand still gently touching her cheek. 'I want to marry you, I'm telling you that now, so that you'll know how serious I am about it. But I'll wait until you're more sure of yourself before I ask you for an answer.'

'I—' She went no further, shaking her head and remembering Lucifer's certainty that Nigel would ask her to marry him much sooner than she expected. She looked out across the darkening

landscape and the gathering storm and shivered. Even the elements, it seemed, were subject to his will, for surely that storm would break within the next hour or so.

CHAPTER SIX

IT was the second thunderstorm in two days and Isobel felt that she was being unfairly tried as she listened to it rage outside. It had even passed through her mind, in a wild moment, that Lucifer had arranged for it to be so bad just so that he could laugh at her fear, then quickly dismissed the idea as not only idiotic but dangerously fanciful.

The tiny cottage shook with the fury of it as every crashing roll of thunder followed lightning flashes that ripped the sky into jagged pieces, reflected a million times in the- rain that hissed and splashed through the leaves outside her windows. It was much worse than the one had been last night, she was convinced of it, although last night she had been at the house with Nigel and Mrs. Grayson for company and better able to contain her fear.

If only this one had come earlier she would not have been alone, but now it was almost midnight and the folk at Kanderby House would almost certainly be in bed. Only an abject coward like herself would have been afraid to go to bed and instead sit curled up as small as possible on the high-backed settee, her head buried in the pile of cushions, shaking like a leaf.

It was difficult to hear anything above the fury of the storm, even if she had not had her ears covered, but some faint insistent sound pierced even her defences and blew, high and thin, on the blustering wind. Isobel raised her head and listened, only to bury it again when a deafening crash followed sharply on a vivid slash of white light almost immediately overhead.

A sullen rumbling respite followed and she lifted her head again, listening, sure now that she recognized the sound - a faint thin wail like a baby crying almost. 'Oh, poor little thing!' Compassion replaced fear for the moment and she hurried to the front door and opened it, crying out when another mighty flash heralded a roll of

thunder that shook the earth. Cold soaking rain slapped into her face as if it had been thrown from a bucket and soaked her through even in the few seconds she stood there. It was impossible to see anything for the blinding downpour, but she shook her head, trying to clear her eyes and see the animal whose plight had called her out.

There was nothing - only the wind howling in the unrelieved darkness, split yet again by another flash of lightning as she struggled with the door, banged back by the wind. 'Isobel!' The cry made her pause, unsure even if she had heard it, but before she could locate it, a tall, dark shape came at her out of the darkness and ran into the hall, slamming the door shut and dripping wetly on to the light tiles as he turned to face her.

'Lucifer!'

She stared at him, raindrops still clinging to her face and hair, her eyes wide and only half believing what they saw. He had a raincoat flung carelessly over his shoulders and his hair flopped wetly over his brow, the dark face streaming with water which he impatiently brushed away with a hand. Black eyes looked at her curiously for a moment before he grinned, and there was something so reassuring about the grin that she instinctively responded to it.

'I expected to see you with your head under the covers,' he told her, and she started nervously at another almighty crash overhead.

'I have been,' she admitted, her voice sounding horribly unsteady as she tried to ignore the noise outside.

'But you were at the door,' he told her, and his eyes sparkled wickedly. 'You didn't anticipate my coming, did you?'

'No, no, of course I didn't. How could I?'

He shrugged, still smiling. 'Oh, I thought you might have joined the ranks of the all-knowing.'

'Well, I haven't.'

He dropped his wet raincoat over a chair in the tiny hall and Isobel led the way into the sitting-room. 'Then am I out of order asking why you were out on the doorstep getting wet, instead of in here where it's dry?'

She turned as she reached the settee where she had been sitting and frowned, remembering the faint plaintive sound that had drawn her from her hiding place to face the storm. 'I - I thought I heard something out there. A - a cry or something, like a cat mewling.'

'And your dear little soft heart made .you brave the storm to rescue it.'

She suspected sarcasm, but another crash of thunder startled her into wide-eyed fear and she put her hands to her mouth to stem the instinctive cry that threatened. 'There — there *was* something out there,' she told him, swallowing hard. 'I couldn't leave it out there, whatever it was, not in this.'

'Did you see anything?'

'No, you must have frightened it away, I suppose.'

He grinned at her. 'In other words it'd rather face the storm than me, is that it?'

'I didn't mean that at all, and you know it,' she told him. 'The poor little creature must have been terrified with all that noise and you coming unexpectedly out of the darkness, so it just ran, I suppose.' In the brief following lull, she eyed him curiously. 'What - what I don't understand is what you were doing out there.' 'Coming home.'

Isobel blinked uncertainly. 'Coming home?'

He nodded, enjoying her curiosity. 'Coming home from Vanessa's.'"

'Oh, I see.'

He sat down, uninvited, on the settee, his long legs crossed one over the other, perfectly at ease and smiling as he read his own story into the mounded cushions at one end. 'You don't, you know.' He grinned up at her, annoy- ingly at ease while she was so uneasy. "Your brain's running in all the wrong directions.'

Isobel frowned. 'I only drew the conclusion you intended I should,' she retorted. 'I don't really care *where* you've been.'

'Oh, you're a *good* little girl,' he jibed, and Isobel flushed.

'I'm not a good little girl, I'm just not inquisitive, that's all.' She looked at him, meeting his eyes and recognizing that welcome reassurance still there. Then she smiled and made a moue of reproach. 'All right, I *am* inquisitive,' she told him. 'If you haven't been to see Vanessa for the - the obvious reason, why have you been?'

He looked as if he wondered what her reaction was going to be, his eyes curious. 'I've been to a meeting.'

Isobel blinked at the unexpectedness of it. 'Oh.'

'Oh.' He mocked her surprise and laughed. 'Or to be more precise, I've been to a gathering of fellow spirits.'

'The Elgin Circle,' she said, understanding at last.

He nodded, casting an eye at the storm raging outside. 'We 'seem to have upset the weather, don't we?' he asked blandly.

'You—' She looked at him uncertainly, the storm seeming louder and even more frightening suddenly, remembering her own hastily dismissed fancies earlier.

'It wasn't raining when we started,' he informed her solemnly, 'and now look at it - real witching weather. Mind you,' he added with apparent seriousness, 'you'd get pretty wet riding your broomstick in this, wouldn't you?'

'Oh, Lucifer, don't!' She sat down next to him on the settee, unable to do anything about the involuntary shudder that ran through her, or the way her hands trembled. 'I - I hate this weather because it makes - makes such a fool of me, you don't have to try and do the same.'

'I'm sorry, *bella mia*.' He covered her trembling hands with his own, a gesture that did nothing to help still them, his eyes showing regret for having added to her fears. 'I shouldn't tease you when you're so frightened.'

'I - I know I'm silly about storms, but I can't help it, and I do try not to make too much of it when I'm not alone.'

'Well, you're not alone now,' he consoled her, his hands still holding hers, strong and reassuring. 'If you'd do something for me,' he added with a smile, 'I'd be grateful, will you?'

She nodded. 'Of course, if I can.'

He ran a hand through his wet hair and pulled a face. 'If I could have a towel for my head, it's pretty wet. Have you got one handy?'

'Oh yes, of course, I'll get one. I'm sorry, I should have thought of it myself.' She fetched a towel from the bathroom, glad of something to occupy her mind, but hurried back to him as fast as she could, because the storm seemed so much worse when she was upstairs.

'Thanks.' He rubbed his black head vigorously and the resultant tousle made him look reassuringly normal when he grinned at her a moment later. 'If I'd had any sense I'd have driven straight round here instead of walking, wouldn't I?'

'I - I suppose so.' She jumped nervously when another crash cracked and rumbled overhead. To be honest she

had scarcely realized what he said, but just the fact that he was there at all helped enormously. She glanced out of the blind, streaming window and shivered. 'I say every time that I *won't* be frightened,' she told him. 'That I *won't* let it turn me into a shivering coward, but it always does.'

He discarded the towel and combed his thick mop of hair into casual order. 'I can see,' he said. 'You really are scared stiff, aren't you?'

She nodded miserably, her hands tightly clasped together on her lap. 'I'm always scared stiff and I hate myself for it, but there's nothing makes any difference.'

'Nothing?' he took her hands again as another crash sent shivers of fear all over her. 'Having someone here helps, doesn't it?' He smiled at her wide-eyed look and squeezed her fingers tightly. 'It's only like the 1812 Overture. Listen to it - the drums and cymbals crashing and the electrician working overtime on the lighting effects.' She shook her head. 'Oh well,' he added, 'I suppose it appeals to my exaggerated sense of the dramatic.'

'I - I think it's because it's so - so wild and uncontrollable that it frightens me so much.'

He laughed, his eyes unbelievably gentle as he looked at her. 'Oh, *piccola*, must you have everything and everybody controlled and - and restrained? Isn't it rather dull?'

'No, no, I don't think so at all,' Isobel denied, wishing her own emotions were under more control at the moment. Her heart was hammering wildly at her ribs and the pulse in her temple throbbed with more than fear of the storm. 'I like things and people I can understand.'

The black eyes studied her face for a moment, then he shook his head. 'You disappoint me, *cara mia*. Don't you ever feel like doing something less - less safe? Challenging something you've never faced before, like this storm, for instance?'

'No - no, I don't.' She raised her eyes again and looked at him, almost appealingly. 'And you despise me for it, don't you?'

He shook his head, smiling, one hand reaching to touch her cheek gently. 'I shouldn't be here if I did,' he told her softly, and Isobel blinked uncertainly, deaf for the first time to the noise outside, as she absorbed his full meaning.

'You—' It was too difficult to put into words, the realization that came to her suddenly, and she could only look at him wide-eyed, comprehending at last.

'I was parking the car,' he told her,, making light of it, 'and I suddenly thought to myself, poor little Isobel, all alone and the heavens opening up over her head, so here I am.'

"You came because - because you thought I'd be afraid?"¹

'I *knew* you'd be afraid,' he corrected her with a grin. 'And I knew it was unlikely that Nigel would be here to hold your hand, so I thought I'd stand in for him.'

'It - it was very kind of you, Lucifer, thank you.'

His smile teased her out of her solemn mood. 'Oh, I'm always kind to children and animals.'

'I'm not-'

I know, I know.' A raised hand stemmed her protest. 'But you did need company didn't you?'

Yes, yes, I did, and I'm very grateful to you for realizing it.'

'Oh well, I suppose poor old Nigel couldn't really be expected to splash his way over here in all that plaster, could he?'

'No, of course not.' She wished she knew how much of the rapid, anxious beating of her heart was due to her fear of the storm and how much to the knowledge that he had come to her because he knew she would be afraid and alone. 'For one thing,' she added, almost without thinking, 'he doesn't know I'm such a coward about storms.'

'He doesn't know?' She shook her head, disliking the expression she glimpsed in his eyes. 'Well, well, well.'

'I don't advertise the fact,' she said. 'I don't really know why I told you.'

'Perhaps because confession is good for the soul,' he suggested lightly, 'and you look upon me as your father- confessor.'

Isobel laughed shortly, looking at him from under her eyelashes. 'I thought you drew the line at anything suggestive of a father figure,' she said.

'I said father-confessor,' he pointed out with a grin. 'There's a difference. The latter aren't always old men.'

'They're not members of a - a heathen club either,' Isobel retorted, 'so you're not suitable for either role.'

'How about big brother?' he suggested. 'Then you can share me with Nigel.' He laughed softly before she could reply. 'Not that you inspire brotherly feelings in any red- blooded man,' he added. 'Even with rain on your nose, you're beautiful.'

She brushed the offending spot with a hand, just in case it existed. 'I wouldn't know what to do with a brother,' she told him. 'I've never had one.'

'An only child?' He made a sympathetic face. 'Poor little kid, no wonder you look so soulful!'

'I'm not a poor little kid, Lucifer, and don't be so blessed-condescending!'

'All right, all right.' He held up his hands defensively. 'But if I'm going to baby-sit for half the night, I expect the usual perks for the job. Where do you keep your coffee?'

'You're not baby-sitting,' Isobel objected. 'And I could have coped perfectly well on my own - I did last night.'

An arched brow challenged her. 'Do you want me to go?' he asked, and she looked at him for a moment, then shook her head. 'Good, then get me some coffee. And incidentally,' he added as she turned to go into the kitchen, 'you weren't on your own last night. It was all over by the time you came flitting back to your little nest.'

'How do you—'

'I saw you,' he told her. 'There was quite a bright moon after all the kerfuffle was over and I spotted you as I got out of my car. As a matter of fact I nearly passed out on the spot, seeing you drifting

through the shrubbery at that time of night - and me *slightly* the worse for wear.'

'I didn't see you.'

'You could have, I wasn't hiding, but I expect you were anxious to get home.' He looked up at her, his eyes taunting. 'You looked all fair and fairy-like in the moonlight,' he added whimsically. 'So much so, in fact, that I had an almost irresistible urge to hail you with "*III met by moonlight, proud Titania*", only I thought you wouldn't appreciate it at that late hour.'

'I wouldn't have,' Isobel agreed.

'Don't you like Shakespeare?'

'Yes, as a matter of fact, I do, but not to the extent ,of playing Titania to your Oberon at eleven o'clock at night.'

'Aaah! And I thought *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was rather appropriate too.'

'In August?' She got to her feet, smiling at her small victory.

'You little Philistine!' he called after her.

'I'll make us both some coffee,' she told him as she disappeared into the kitchen, 'it's no use trying to sleep while this goes on.' She was forced to admit, however, that although the storm still raged outside she had never felt less afraid of one in her life and she thanked her stars for Lucifer's impulsive action and his consequent distraction, even if he was mostly teasing her.

'Can I help?' he offered, and she laughed.

'No, thanks, I can manage on my own.'

'Don't you want me to hold your hand when the big bangs come?'

She ignored the jibe and switched on the kitchen light, taking things from cupboards almost automatically, taking out cups and saucers, sugar and coffee. She put the kettle on to boil and got a tray from beside the dresser. It was when she straightened up with the tray in her hand that she saw the small, silent movement beside the table. Nothing really tangible, but a tiny dark shadow that, a second later, she was not even sure she'd seen, but she stood stiff and wary for a second or two. Then several things happened at once.

A long jagged flash split the black sky in two and an enormous crash of thunder set the spoons rattling in the saucers, at the same time a small black shape fled swiftly from beneath a chair and across the kitchen floor. Isobel's scream almost outdid the storm and she dropped the tray with a resounding crash on the tiled floor.

It was only a split second later that Lucifer came striding across the kitchen and barely more before she was tight in his arms, her heart hammering wildly as she clung to him. 'It's all right, *carissima*, it's all right.' The soft, deep voice was comfortingly close against her ear and a soothing hand held her head against his chest, shutting out everything but his warmth and strength.

How long she stayed like that, she had no idea, but the storm seemed suddenly to have receded and it was almost reluctantly that she raised her head and looked at him.

'I'm - I'm sorry,' she said meekly.

The black eyes teased her, his arms still around her, but a little less tightly. 'I told you you should have let me hold your hand,' he said. 'You see what happens when you're stubborn?'

'You were the one who said I should face up to a challenge,' she reminded him, suddenly and inexplicably light-headed. 'And there was something - something moved down by the chair there.'

'Something moved down by the chair,' he echoed, and laughed. *You have a sense of the dramatic too, *bella mia*.'

She felt oddly fluttery and wary as she looked up at him. '*Must* you use Italian words?' she asked shortly, and he pulled her head back against his chest for a moment.

'Only when I get carried away,' he told her softly. 'I speak as much Italian as English, you know, and I don't see why you should object to my using both.'

'I'm sorry.' She raised her head again, looking slightly shamefaced at her outburst. 'But I *did* see something, Lucifer, I swear I did.'

'So you did,' he agreed, and smiled at her puzzled frown. He walked over to the door into the sitting-room and snapped his fingers. 'Here! Come here!' Isobel watched him curiously as he bent and retrieved something just out of her view. 'Here's your intruder,' he told her. 'The one you went out to rescue.'

He held a huge black cat in his arms, its silky fur glistening in the light, slanted amber eyes half-closed in ecstasy as strong fingers caressed its chin.

'I knew I heard a cat out there,' Isobel laughed, almost hysterically relieved. 'He must have come in while I had the door open.'

'*She* must have done,' he said.

'He or she,' Isobel remarked, 'it gave me the fright of my life.'

'Don't tell me you're scared of cats too?' he said, and she shook her head.

'No, of course not.'

'Of course not,' he echoed, and grinned. 'For a moment I thought it might have been your familiar.'

'My - my familiar?'

He nodded, still smiling, his dark eyes taunting her wariness. 'All witches have a familiar,' he informed her, 'and it's quite often a black cat. It's supposed to be her attendant spirit or demon, and this is the kind of night for them to be abroad, isn't it?'

'Must you?' Isobel complained. 'You know that witchcraft jargon makes me jittery, and I have enough to contend with without you making it worse.'

'Did you know that Isobel is a traditional name for witches?' he asked softly, and she looked at him for a moment uncomprehendingly. 'It's true,' he added when she looked like arguing. 'Elizabeth, Betty, Isobel, Bella, Luebella, they're all witches' names, didn't you know?'

'Of course I didn't know,' Isobel told him, eyeing the huge black cat with less favour now than she had done. 'And - and I'm not sure I believe you, anyway.'

He laughed again and rubbed the cat's chin. 'I told you you were a little witch,' he said. 'A very pretty little witch.'

'I most certainly am *not*!'

'Oh, but you *are*,' he said softly, an expression in his eyes that she could not accurately interpret but which made her heart flutter restlessly against her ribs. 'A witch is capable of casting spells,' he

went on, still in that same quiet, almost hypnotic voice, 'and you can cast the most wonderful spells, *cara mia*; I know.'

'Lucifer, stop it, please!'

He smiled, his long fingers still caressing the cat. 'For a non-believer,' he told her, 'you certainly get involved, don't you? I've told you there's nothing to be afraid of, once you know about it, so take my word for it.'

'I don't believe any of it,' Isobel assured him, hoping she sounded more convinced than she felt. 'It's a lot of rubbish.'

'Oh no, not rubbish,' he denied, 'but perfectly explainable when you know how. Pyewacket here, for instance, isn't really a bewitched cat, but you were almost ready to believe she was, weren't you?'

'Pyewacket?'

'The witch's cat,' he told her. 'Another traditional name, like Isobel. Really she's only a common or garden moggie, although she's rather a beauty.'

'She is a beauty,' Isobel agreed.

'And black too,' he grinned, reminding her of the old superstition. 'Lucky.'

Isobel extended a hand to stroke the sleek black head and the cat struck - viciously and swiftly, claws extended and the amber eyes squinting maliciously. Isobel snatched back her hand, putting it instinctively to her mouth as the scratches stung sharply. 'Not so lucky for me,' she retorted. 'Of all the ungrateful creatures!'

'Proving she's a female,' Lucifer declared with certainty. 'She's jealous and she let you know it, didn't you, Pye?' The cat contentedly

lifted its chin and purred loudly, its amber-coloured eyes fixed warningly on Isobel.

'Since the admiration is obviously mutual,' Isobel told him shortly, 'you'd better take her with *you*.'

'I don't want a cat,' he said, putting the animal down on the floor where it rubbed against his legs still purring. 'Anyway, it's got a good home of its own already.' Isobel looked at him curiously. 'It's Vanessa's,' he explained.

'Oh, I see.'

'Do you? I suppose you're now thinking that the cat scratched you on Vanessa's behalf, aren't you?' Her expression was sufficient confirmation, and he laughed, shaking his head slowly. 'In fact it's simply because she's used to me and not you, so she lashed out. Easy.'

'Oh, all right,' Isobel agreed. 'Anyway, I wish you'd take her with you when you go. I don't fancy having a vicious cat here all night.'

'I will,' he promised. 'In the meantime, let me see those scratches.' He took her hand in both his and looked at the bright red scores on the back of it. 'I'd better put something on those before you go funny.'

'I don't go funny,' she objected, 'and they're only surface scratches - don't fuss.'

'I'm not fussing, I'm using my common sense.'

'You're being bossy.'

'And you're being sassy again,' he warned. 'One of these days I shall do something about it.'

'I wonder you don't put me to bed without any supper while you're about it,' Isobel retorted. 'I'm not a child, Lucifer, and I wish you'd stop treating me like one.'

'You bury your head like a baby when it thunders,' he taunted, and Isobel flushed indignantly.

'Oh, you horrible brute! You didn't have to use that against me; you know I'm ashamed of myself for being such a coward and you rub it in, it's not fair!'

'It serves you right for being cheeky! Now let me put something on those scratches. And for heaven's sake don't argue,' he added impatiently. 'You are the stubbornest little wretch ever born, I swear it.'

She conceded him victory for the moment, and fetched disinfectant and cotton wool, watching as he gently bathed the scratches, keeping a wary eye on the cat as it watched the proceedings malevolently from the doorway. Sitting, some time later, drinking coffee with Lucifer in her tiny sitting-room, she could not help wondering what Nigel would have said if he could have seen them, and decided he would in all probability have second thoughts about letting her work for Lucifer and also doubt her common sense where his brother was concerned.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'LUCIFER says it belongs to Vanessa Law,' Isobel told Nigel the following day when she was called upon, inevitably, to explain the scratches on her hand. 'Its name is Pyewacket.'

'Well, he'd know, certainly,' Nigel said dryly. 'He spends enough time up there.'

'He spends most of his time working,' Isobel retorted unthinkingly, and earned herself a frown of disapproval.

'Oh, I'm not denying he works hard all day,' Nigel allowed, 'but he also spends a good deal of time with Vanessa, and he'd certainly know her cat.'

'The thing seemed to know him very well, she made no attempt to scratch *him*,' Isobel said, rather rashly in the circumstances.

'I can believe it,' Nigel remarked, a bit sourly, she thought. 'Being a female she wouldn't, would she?'

He seemed not to have noticed anything untoward so far and she rather optimistically began to wonder if she might, by some miracle, get away with not telling him about Lucifer's visit last night, although it was a pretty vain hope one way and another. 'Lucifer suggested she might have been jealous of another female,' she told him, giving nothing else away.

'He could be right,' Nigel agreed, 'although I can't think why the thing should have been jealous of you in your own house. How did it come to be in your cottage anyway?' he added.

Isobel shrugged, seeing dangerous ground looming large. 'It must have run in when I opened the front door, I suppose. I heard it mewling outside and went to see what was wrong, but it was so dark

and wet I couldn't see a thing out there. The first I knew it was there was when it ran out from under the kitchen table and nearly frightened the life out of me.'

He frowned, still puzzled. 'I can't understand why the wretched thing was out at all last night,' he said. 'Especially in that storm.'

'Maybe it stays out at night,' Isobel suggested, but he shook his head.

'No, it doesn't. It's coddled and cosseted like a baby, that great brute, and it's certainly never out in the rain.'

'Well, it was last night.'

'Odd.' He frowned over it. 'Mind you, it's not very far coming across the fields for an animal. It may have escaped.'

'Maybe it got out when Lucifer left Vanessa's,' Isobel said, unthinkingly. 'They arrived about the same time.'

His expression told her that every chance she had ever had, however slender, of keeping Lucifer's visit a secret from him had just disappeared. She felt him watching her closely, although she preferred not to look at him at the moment, feeling rather as she had once or twice at Frome's when she had been reprimanded for some small carelessness.

'How do you know what time Luke arrived home?' he asked, and she hesitated. Only fractionally but long enough, she realized, to confirm his suspicions that she was keeping something from him.

'Well - well, as a matter of fact he came across and spoke to me.' It was near enough to the truth and she could see that being honest was no more popular than she had anticipated.

'Spoke to you?' Suspicion glinted at her from his blue eyes and he regarded her sternly, as if she had been guilty of some dastardly crime. 'I can't see why he needed to come anywhere near your cottage at that time of night and in that storm. Why did he, Isobel?'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Nigel, does it matter?'

He frowned, unwilling to give even an inch, it seemed. '*I think so,*' he said. 'Unless of course you have any particular reason for *not* telling me.'

Isobel looked up, getting more angry with him than she would have thought possible. 'Of course I haven't,' she told him, 'and you shouldn't be so suspicious, it's not fair.'

'Then tell me,' he said shortly, and Isobel sighed resignedly.

'I - I opened the front door when I heard that wretched cat mewing outside,' she told him reluctantly, 'and - well, I suppose he saw the light and was curious. It *was* nearly midnight.'

'All the more reason for not coming over, I'd have thought in the circumstances,' he told her shortly. 'But he couldn't possibly have seen your hall light from his driveway, Isobel, there's the main drive and a couple of shrubberies between you.'

Isobel sighed resignedly and looked down at her fingers, tracing the tell-tale scratches on the back of her left hand. 'Maybe he felt like playing knight-errant,' she said lightly in an effort to lift the air of gloom that seemed to have enveloped him. 'To be honest, Nigel, I was silly enough to tell Lucifer that thunderstorms frighten me to death and he - well, he came over to see if I was O.K.'

'You're frightened of thunderstorms?' He looked more disbelieving than sympathetic. 'Why, for heaven's sake?' ^

'Oh, how do I know?' Isobel exclaimed. 'They just do, that's all, I've been frightened of them ever since I was a child.'

'You didn't tell me.'

'I - I thought you might think I was stupid.'

'But you told Luke. Does he think you're stupid?'

She lifted her head, her grey eyes thoughtful. 'Rather surprisingly,' she said, 'he doesn't.'

'And what was the object of his visit?' he asked. 'Or - perhaps I shouldn't ask in the circumstances.'

'Of course you can ask,' Isobel told him, determinedly offhand about it all. 'His term was to hold my hand. Metaphorically, of course,' she added hastily. 'Actually it did help a lot just having someone there with me.'

'If you'd let me know how you felt about storms,' Nigel said reproachfully, 'I could have held your hand, literally, not metaphorically. Why didn't you come over to the house and let me know?'

'Oh, Nigel, how could I? It was pouring with rain, and anyway I expect you were in bed by then, not being a coward like me. I can cope on my own fairly well when I have to.'

'But you obviously can't,' he argued, 'and I don't like Luke taking things like that upon himself, not with you. He'd no right to come over to you. Damn him, why can't he run true to form?'

His vehemence startled her and she wondered how much more angry he would have been if he had known about the moment of truth when

she had dropped the tray and Lucifer had held her tight in his arms. 'Isn't he running true to form?' she asked.

'Of course not. I've never known him care tuppence whether anyone's scared of a thing or not. He's no patience with fear as a rule, he's as hard as iron.'

'He was very kind to me last night.'

It was perhaps rubbing salt into the wound, but she felt bound to speak as she found, and Lucifer had been kind, and gentle too, certainly not as hard as iron.

'Oh, damn him!' Frustration at his own forced inactivity welled up and almost choked him and Isobel believed that in that moment he really hated his brother.

'Nigel, please don't,' she begged. 'There's no need for you to feel that way about it. He came over because he knew I was frightened of the storm, that's all. He comforted me as he would have done a - a child. That's how he sees me, Nigel, as a child. He always treats me as one.'

'A child!' He looked at her, his blue eyes dark with some expression she found it hard to recognize. 'You're not a child, and he knows it.'

'I am as far as Lucifer is concerned,' she insisted. 'Why, he even calls me a cheeky kid,' she added to add conviction, although she almost despaired of ever convincing him.

'He's got more nerve than anyone I know,' he said darkly, 'and I wish he'd marry Vanessa and get out of my way.'

'Out of your way?' Isobel looked startled.

'Oh, you know what I mean.' He looked so disgruntled for a moment that she was unsure of the best way to deal with his mood. Then he

suddenly looked up at her and pulled a face. 'I suppose the truth is he gives me a real granddaddy of an inferiority complex,' he confessed. 'He's so smooth and unflappable, I loathe him for it.'

'Oh, don't do that, he's your brother.'

'I know,' he sighed, 'and that makes it worse in a way. If he wasn't I could hate him without feeling guilty about it.' He took her hand in his and pressed his lips to her fingers. 'I suppose I should be grateful to him for taking care of you last night,' he said ruefully.

Isobel laughed, as much relieved as amused. 'I could have coped without him, even if it does help to have company,' she told him. 'And I could well have done without his feline companion. She didn't like me at all.'

'It's Vanessa's,' he said shortly, 'she wouldn't.'

'It's a vicious great brute,' Isobel remarked. 'Although it was very fussy with Lucifer; it watched me with its big yellow eyes as if it suspected me of heaven knows what.'

Nigel lifted her scratched hand and kissed its palm, an unusually sentimental gesture for him, although he had taken to such gestures lately. 'I'm sorry I snapped at you, darling, but it's these damned legs and the heat too, I feel so useless all the time.' He leaned over and kissed her mouth. 'But I'll personally strangle that ghastly animal if it hurts you again,' he promised.

After the thunderstorms the weather seemed to improve again and it was warm and sunny without the oppressive humidity that had played havoc with tempers for the past few days. Isobel found it difficult to believe that she had been working for Lucifer for almost a month, although she seemed to have known him for much longer than that.

He was not an easy man to know well, she thought, but he had such an easy way with him that made short acquaintance seem much longer.

She watched him now as he bent over a page of the almost indecipherable longhand she would be required to translate when he was satisfied with it, and frowned curiously. Nigel had said he wished Lucifer would marry Vanessa and settle down, but Isobel had her own ideas about that, although she had, wisely, so far said nothing to Nigel about them. In fact she could not really imagine Lucifer married to anyone at all, for, despite his extrovert manner, he had a strange air of remoteness about him at times.

He looked up suddenly and caught her watching him, smiling when she flushed bright pink and hastily looked down at her typing. 'Why the interest, *piccola*?' he asked quietly, and Isobel shook her head without looking up.

'I was just taking a breather,' she told him.

'You were watching me,' he insisted. 'I know it, I could sense you looking at me, that's why I looked up.'

'You flatter yourself,' she retorted, refusing to be inveigled into admitting it. 'You just happen to sit in the window, that's all, and I was looking out at the sunshine, not at you at all.'

'Liar,' he said softly, and laughed when she looked up indignantly.

'I *beg* your pardon!'

'Granted,' he obliged with another short laugh. He leaned his elbows on the desk and looked across at her, his eyes seeming to look right into her as they always did. 'But your attention was wandering, whether you were looking at me or not,' he insisted, and she shrugged.

'Only temporarily,' she said, and looked at him challengingly down her nose. 'Are you going to sack me for laziness?'

'Not this time,' he allowed, apparently serious. He studied her for a second or two, chin resting on steepled fingers. 'Are you bored with your job?' he asked at last, and she looked startled.

'No. No, of course I'm not.'

'I'm relieved to hear it.'

She looked at him curiously. 'What made you ask me that?'

He shrugged, smiling wryly. 'Oh, I don't know, I just wondered, that's all.'

'But why on earth should you wonder such a thing?' Isobel demanded. 'I've given you no cause to think I'm bored, have I?'

'No.' He studied her again for a second or two. 'But girls of your age seem to change their jobs almost as often as they change their boy-friends!'

'Well, in my case that's not very often, is it?' Isobel retorted, and he laughed.

'No, it isn't, I grant you that, not while you're more or less going steady, as they say, with Nigel, but I sometimes have the feeling that one of these days you'll tell Nigel where he gets off and disappear into the blue.' His expression challenged her to deny it. 'And I'd hate you to leave me in the lurch,' he added.

Isobel looked at him unbelievably for a moment. 'I certainly wouldn't leave you without due notice,' she told him, and he smiled.

'No, being a nicely trained girl, you wouldn't.'

His slightly condescending air was beginning to annoy her. 'Girls of my age, as you term it,' she informed him loftily, 'are no worse for changing their jobs than anyone else. We're just as hard-working and reliable as the rest, so you have no call to be so blasted patronizing!'

'And you have no call to cuss, my girl. I don't like it.'

'I wasn't cussing!' She looked indignant and not a little surprised at his tone. 'For heaven's sake, I'm not a baby, I can say blasted if I like without you going all righteous about it.'

Repeating the word gave her a certain amount of pleasure when she saw him frown again. 'I'm not going all righteous, as you call it, heaven forbid I ever should, but you're not the kind of girl who should swear at all, however mildly. It spoils the effect.'

'Don't you approve of women being allowed a mild cuss?' she asked. 'That's a bit of nasty sex discrimination, isn't it?'

'Not girls like you,' he insisted.

Isobel could scarcely believe he was serious, and yet he appeared to be. The revelation of this unexpected streak of puritanism in him, of all people, gave her an elated feeling of having got the upper hand for once, and she would not have been human if she had not made the most of it-

'I'm sorry I offended your sensitive ear,' she teased him, and saw a swift glitter of anger in his eyes which vanished almost immediately.

'Don't behave out of character, Isobel, it doesn't suit you.'

Something - some intangible something in his voice and his eyes - encouraged her and she laughed, her grey eyes dancing mischief at the idea of being able to shock him.

'*Si, papa!*'

Revenge was very sweet and she watched his dark face run through a gamut of expressions before he got to his feet and came across to her. 'Say that again, if you dare,' he said softly, and she hastily lowered her eyes, finding the black gaze far too disconcerting close to, wondering if she had been too rash and he was genuinely angry with her. The unfamiliar excitement she felt, however, egged her on.

'I've been learning Italian,' she told him defiantly and untruthfully.

'Oh no, you haven't,' he argued. 'Everyone knows *that* much Italian.'

'Do they?'

He nodded, lifting her chin with one finger although she still refused to look at him. 'If you *want* to learn Italian,' he told her, 'I'll teach you with pleasure, but if you call me that again I'll—'

'You'll what?' she asked innocently, raising her eyes.

He said nothing for a moment, simply stood beside her his eyes glistening with something she could only guess at, but which set her heart racing wildly and brought the colour flooding to her cheeks. Then he bent over her, his strong hands either side of her face, holding her so that she could not escape him even had she wanted to, drawing her to her feet so that she stood close to him, and saw the dark, glistening, almost hungry look in his eyes before she closed her own.

His mouth was firm but unbelievably gentle as he kissed her, her head forced back against his fingers, holding her for so long that she felt her heart must stop. Only it didn't - it tapped away anxiously at her ribs as if it sought to escape. She kept her eyes closed even after he released her, and his lips brushed warmly against her forehead before he moved away abruptly.

'Pack up and go home,' he told her shortly, before she had time to recover, and she saw that he was already over by his own desk again and standing with his back to her, looking out of the window.

'But - but it's only—'

'Go home, Isobel.' She scarcely recognized the voice that spoke to her so shortly over one shoulder, and there was a tense stillness about him as if he was waiting for her to go - wanted her to go.

He did not even turn around when, several minutes later, she called out a tentative goodnight. 'Goodnight.' He answered briefly and without his customary casual wave to her as she went out of the door. She felt suddenly and inexplicably sad as she looked back briefly at the tall, dark figure outlined against the sunny window.

Isobel's feelings were oddly mixed that evening as she sat with Nigel after dinner as usual. She could not have said whether she was glad or sorry that Lucifer had kissed her like that, although inevitably it would make her more self-conscious in his presence.

It was, she supposed, partly her fault that it had happened at all, but she had thought Nigel's assurance that she was not Lucifer's type of woman was a fact and the risk she took in teasing him as she had had not occurred to her until it was too late. Also, she recognized ruefully, she had not realized what her own response would be.

Preoccupied as she was, she appeared much quieter than usual and Nigel, almost inevitably, commented on it. 'Is something wrong?' he asked, taking her hand, and she shook her head, smiling to reassure him.

'No, nothing's wrong, I'm just a bit tired, that's all.'

'Has the slave-driver been standing over you with the whip again?'

She shook her head again. "No, in fact he's been very good lately. Not that he's ever as bad as you make him sound,' she added hastily.

'He let you off early enough tonight,' he remarked, not challenging her on her last words as she half expected him to. 'What came over him?'

She shrugged, making light of her early dismissal. She had certainly no intention of telling him of the outcome of her teasing Lucifer. 'I don't know what came over him,' she said. 'Maybe he felt tired too and thought he'd have an early evening for a change.'

'Hmm. Or more likely he's seeing Vanessa.'

'He didn't say so.' She must surely have imagined that edge of resentment on her voice, she thought, but even so Nigel looked at her sharply.

'Does he usually confide in you about his off-duty plans?' he asked, and Isobel shook her head.

'Not always, but he sometimes says where he's going.' She was thoughtfully quiet for a minute or two. 'I expect he *is* seeing Vanessa,' she said at last.

The blue eyes quizzed her briefly, then he half-smiled. 'You don't like her, do you?'

The question was unexpected and Isobel looked startled for a moment. 'I've never really had the opportunity to find out whether I do or not,' she said. 'A five-minute meeting in a hallway is hardly long enough to judge, is it? I don't imagine I'd take to her very easily,' she added, and laughed. 'Any more than she did to me.'

'Ah, but I would say her dislike of you was quite understandable in the circumstances,' Nigel told her. 'After all, you work with Luke all day.'

Isobel looked down at her hands. 'She's jealous, you mean?'

He nodded. 'Without a doubt, I should say. She's jealous of any woman who gets within smiling distance of Luke, and she wouldn't realize that she has nothing to worry about where you're concerned.'

'No. No, of course not,' Isobel agreed hastily, touching one finger to her lips almost unconsciously. 'But I'm rather surprised they're still on speaking terms if she's as jealous as you say. After all, didn't you say he had quite a few women friends at various times?'

Nigel shrugged, pulling a face over something he had given up trying to understand. 'Vanessa's the sort who never gives up,' he said. 'They've known each other about six years now and they've been on the brink of marrying for most of that time, as far as I can gather.'

'You-mean Vanessa *thinks* she's been on the brink of getting married,' Isobel told him, rather rashly scornful of the other woman's optimism. 'But if she's waiting for Lucifer I'm pretty certain she'll be unlucky. He isn't the marrying kind, he told me so.'

Nigel looked at her closely, his blue eyes narrowed suspiciously. 'You sound very sure about that,' he told her. 'How on earth can you know? What made him even mention the subject to you, of all people?'

Isobel laughed, a little uneasily now that she realized how rash she had been. 'Oh, it was just one of those things that crop up,' she told him. 'Actually he was teasing me about whether I would marry you or not.'

He frowned. 'Does it concern him?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know, I never know what Lucifer's thinking, or very seldom anyway But he was teasing me, as I say, and I retaliated by suggesting that he did something about himself before he started worrying about me. He told me he wasn't the marrying sort - and oddly enough I believed him.'

'So do I,' Nigel agreed, rather surprisingly.

Isobel raised her brows, curious to know his reasons. 'You don't think he's the marrying kind either?'

He shrugged. 'Well, he's shown no sign all these years of settling down with one woman for life. Maybe he isn't.'

She smiled wryly, wondering if she was betraying too much interest and if he would notice it. 'From what you say he's had plenty of choice over the years,' she said. 'So maybe he just hasn't found the right woman yet.'

'Maybe - God knows he's had enough choice.' He sounded as if he envied him. He was silent for a moment, then he frowned as if something puzzled him. 'You know, it's odd, but I've always had the feeling about Luke that he's a bit of a loner despite his women.'

'He's not an easy man to know,' Isobel said softly, and Nigel nodded agreement.

'No, I suppose he isn't.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

ISOBEL had an uneasy, fluttery feeling in her tummy when she thought about reporting for work next morning. She had even, during the early hours of the morning, wondered if Lucifer would send her packing altogether, playing safe in case anything similar happened again. She was not really surprised, however, when he greeted her in exactly the same way as he always did. He seemed to have forgotten their abrupt parting last night, a fact about which she was unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

He looked up with a wide grin when she walked, rather hesitantly, into the room. She could not have explained why she had dressed with such extra care that morning, only that she had felt some inexplicable urge to look a little different. Her hair was not simply drawn back and tied as it usually was, but lifted from her neck and falling into wisping softness that framed her face. The sleeveless white dress was one she had never worn before too, and it flattered the pale gold tan she had acquired during the past few weeks, making her corn-gold hair look even lighter.

The grin, she noticed, was dismissed in favour of an appreciative smile when he saw her, and she wondered how she would cope with comments on her appearance if he made any.

'Good morning,' she ventured warily, and he laughed softly, almost as if he knew exactly how she felt and was prepared to make the most of it.

'Good morning, *piccolo*, it's a lovely day again.'

'Lovely,' Isobel echoed, and sat down at her desk, giving all her attention to uncovering her typewriter and folding the cover carefully.

He looked at her for a minute in silence. 'Are you in a working mood today?' he asked, and she looked up, frowning curiously.

'As much as I usually am,' she agreed. 'Why?'

He smiled. 'You look far too beautiful to sit behind a desk all day,' he told her. The black eyes flicked upwards. 'And I like your hair like that.'

She fought against the wild hammering of her heart, to make her voice sound matter-of-fact. 'Thank you.'

She thought he was surprised at her apparent unconcern and got on with getting out the manuscript she was working on. 'Why did you change it?'

The shrug she gave was careless and she only wished that her fingers would feel less trembly as they clumsily sorted the sheets of manuscript. 'I like a change sometimes, and it's much cooler like this.' She looked across at him, as blandly unconcerned as she could appear. 'Are we going to be very busy today?'

He leaned his chin on one hand, the elbow resting on his desk, the black eyes watching her with a disconcerting steadiness. 'That's entirely up to you,' he informed her.

'Me? But-'

'Whether *you're* busy or not,' he explained. 'I had an idea in the early hours,' he went on, 'but I'm not sure if you'll agree to it - not after last night.'

It was most unfair of him to have brought that up without warning, for she knew she was blushing like a schoolgirl. 'Last night,' she declared, with deceptive airiness, 'was a - a mere incident that meant

nothing to anybody, and I refuse to let you embarrass me with it, Lucifer, so please don't try.'

'You're blushing!' he told her, laughter in his eyes.

'Stop it, Lucifer!'

He tried to look suitably solemn. 'But I like teasing you.'

'I know you do,' Isobel retorted. 'It's a way of showing your masculine superiority - or so you think.'

He laughed then, and Isobel restrained the impulse to throw something at him. 'I don't think I'd better mention my idea after all,' he told her. 'Not in the circles. I don't suppose you'd come anyway.'

'Come?' He had captured her interest as he knew he inevitably would. 'Come where?'

'Out,' he said. 'I thought we could work until about ten o'clock and then sneak off.' He laughed at her startled expression. 'Strictly on business,' he explained. 'I have to see someone in Edgemorton about eleven and my bit of business won't take very long, then I thought we could have an early lunch.'

'Oh.' The invitation was so unexpected that it left her at a loss and very unsure what she should do. Certainly Nigel would not view the outing with much favour, but it would be nice to have lunch out for a change and if it was business then he could surely not say too much against it.

'Do - do you *need* me?' she asked, and he smiled.

'Of course I do.'

'In my capacity as secretary, I mean,' she explained, and he shook his head.

'No, but it doesn't make any difference, surely, does it?' He knew quite well it did, Isobel thought, but he was not going to admit it. 'I like travelling in pretty company,' he told her, 'and I certainly don't like lunching alone, especially in a restaurant. Will you come with me?'

'Thank you, I'd like to.'

'I thought you might,' he said. 'You don't go out very often, do you?' It sounded very much like criticism of Nigel, the way he said it, Isobel thought, and frowned.

'I don't really mind,' she told him. 'I'm quite happy going on as I am.' She looked at him curiously. 'Are you sure I shan't be in the way while you're talking to your - your business friend?'

'No, of course you won't. I shall send you off to do some shopping or something equally extravagant, and pick you up when it's all over. O.K.?' His eyes teased her. 'You're not scared of walking around a strange town on your own, are you?'

'No, of course not!' She raised bright indignant eyes to glare at him. 'I've told you before, Lucifer, I'm not a baby, although you will insist on treating me like one. I'm a grown woman and perfectly capable of taking care of myself.'

'Except in thunderstorms,' he said softly, and Isobel looked at him reproachfully.

'That,' she declared, 'was a low blow.'

'It was,' he admitted. '*Scusa, signorina*, I should have known better.'

'You should,' she retorted. She remembered suddenly that considering she was being taken out for lunch, she was perhaps being rather ungracious and she smiled across at him. 'I'm looking forward to my lunch out,' she told him, placatingly, 'thank you for thinking of me, Lucifer.' She eyed him for a moment, musingly. 'You're very nice sometimes,' she told him, and he looked doubtful.

'Nice?' he queried. 'I'm not sure I can live that one down.'

'Then don't try,' Isobel told him, laughing at his expression.

It was a little after ten o'clock when he told her to finish the page she was doing and then pack up and, by a quarter past, they were ready to go. She glanced along the drive briefly at Kanderby House as they went out to the car, wondering what Nigel was doing with himself.

He chafed more and more lately at his enforced inactivity and she thought, yet again, how he would hate the idea of her going off with Lucifer, especially as it meant he would not see her at lunch time as he usually did.

As usual Lucifer correctly interpreted her hasty glance and shook his head as he saw her into the car. 'No, you don't have to let Nigel know you're going out with me,' he told her, and grinned at her inevitable look of surprise.

'You're reading my mind again,' she accused. 'I wish you wouldn't, it's most discomfiting.'

'Only if you have a guilty conscience, surely,' he said. 'And you haven't, have you?'

'No more than anyone else,' Isobel allowed. 'But you're much too good at it, Lucifer, sometimes you - you bother me.'

He stood looking down at her, his hands on the car door, leaning just above her and much too close for comfort when she remembered his similar stance last night.

'Why does it bother you, *bella mia*? I only guessed that you were thinking of Nigel because you looked up at the house. I've told you there's nothing magic or difficult about it. And let's face it,' he added with a smile, 'you're not very hard to read.'

'Oh!' She shrugged herself straight in her seat and turned a reproachful profile to him. 'Just the same I *should* let Nigel know I'm going out, he might wonder what's happened to me if he doesn't see me at lunch- time.'

'He already knows,' he informed her, walking round the car and tucking his long legs under the steering wheel, smiling at her as he slammed the door shut. 'I told him while you were out powdering your nose ready to leave.'

'Oh. Oh well, I suppose it's all right, then.'

'Quite all right,' he told her. 'He wasn't very pleased of course, being Nigel, but he raised no worthwhile arguments, so I took it that we had his permission to go.'

'You shouldn't tease him so,' Isobel reproached him. 'Especially when he's so unwell. Those legs of his worry him an awful lot in this hot weather.'

'I know they do,' he agreed, 'but at least he knows it isn't permanent, and self-pity isn't going to help him or anyone else, is it?'

She looked at him reprovingly as they drove out through the gates and on to the road. 'Sometimes,' she told him, 'I think Nigel's right about you - you *are* as hard as iron.'

He laughed, completely undismayed by the criticism as usual. 'Is that what he says?'

'He - he did once,' she admitted, wondering if she had been too frank. Knowing him, it was possible that he would mention the fact to Nigel, even if it was only to laugh about it. You - you won't tell him I told you, will you?' she asked.

'Don't worry,' he told her cheerfully. 'I hardly think that's the worst thing Nigel's ever said about me, anyway, and I won't tell him - unless I'm pressed, of course,' he added, and she looked at him anxiously.

'Lucifer—'

'Relax, *piccola*.' He spared a hand from the steering wheel and patted hers lying in her lap. 'We're going to enjoy ourselves.'

Edgemorton was bigger than Isobel remembered it from the one and only time she had been there before, and she had no difficulty in occupying her time in the variety of shops while Lucifer was busy. She was, as he had suggested, rather extravagant, but since she had been living in the little cottage at Kanderby House, her expenses had been negligible and she had never been on a real shopping spree, so she delighted in spending some of her accumulated wealth on two new dresses and some shoes.

She kept a careful eye on the time and managed to find her way back to their appointed meeting place almost exactly on time, blinking her surprise when she found Lucifer already there. Either his business must have taken less time than he had anticipated or else her watch was slow. He appeared not to mind the wait, however, for he smiled as he glanced at his watch when she joined him.

'I'm not late, am I?' she asked anxiously, and he shook his head.

'Spot on time as usual,' he told her. 'It's all those years working for Nigel, I suppose, you're an inadvertent clockwatcher.'

'If I'm punctual you have no cause for complaint,' she declared, and he smiled, taking her arm as they started walking.'

'I've no complaints at all,' he told her. 'Far from it.' He glanced down at her packages and relieved her of the two larger ones. 'I see you took me at my word,' he said, 'and were madly extravagant.'

'I thought I might as well while I had the opportunity.' She flicked him a brief look from under her lashes. 'I was only following orders,' she added.

'Does that mean I'm expected to foot the bill?'

'No, certainly not!' She looked quite scandalized at the idea. 'I buy my own clothes, then there are no strings attached.'

He regarded her curiously for a second or two while they made their way back to the car-park. 'You're an independent little devil, aren't you?' he said at last.

Isobel stuck out her chin, suspecting criticism. 'I prefer it that way.' Surprisingly he said nothing for a minute or two, but the hand that held her arm hugged it close to him for a moment and he smiled. 'We'll park your shopping in the car,' he told her, 'and then go in search of lunch.'

The smells that permeated the restaurant they went into were delicious and Isobel was reminded how hungry she was. It was a big, luxuriously modern place and looked as if the clientele might be expected to pay for the expensive decor as well as their lunches. The waitresses, too, had that suitably reserved look that would never be guilty of actually showing expression or addressing their customers as 'love'.

It was, Isobel thought, quite the most grand place she'd ever been taken to and she could not help but smile over the difference in taste between the two brothers. Nigel usually took her somewhere small and discreet, but quite cosy and with an excellent cuisine.

'I suppose,' Lucifer said as they studied the menu, 'being such a little 'un, you have an enormous appetite?'

'I can do my share,' Isobel informed him, 'and I warn you I'm hungry. Do little girls always have big appetites?' she asked curiously a few minutes later, and he laughed.

'I don't really know,' he confessed. 'I've never lunched with such a diddy one before.'

'You're being patronizing again,' she warned him. 'I'm not that small. Anyway, good things come in small packages, so they say.'

'Do they now?' His eyes danced wickedly as he leaned toward her across the table. 'Are you *good*, Isobel?' he added softly and in such a way that she felt the colour flood into her cheeks, laying such emphasis on the word that there was no doubt as to his meaning.

T-1 try to be.' She wondered suddenly if he found her amusingly different from his more usual type of companion. The sophisticated thirties, as Nigel had called them.

He nodded slowly, sweeping her with one expressive glance that made her feel even more gauche. 'Yes,' he said softly. 'Nigel wouldn't want to know you if you weren't.'

'You make virtue sound like a vice,' she told him, her hands clasped tightly together, lying on the table before her.

'I wasn't trying to,' he denied quietly. 'It's - just what it sounds - a virtue and it's part of you, *bella mia*, as much as your youth and

beauty.' His eyes swept over her again, this time with a more gentle look in them and he smiled. 'You look very, very lovely in that white dress, it's most appropriate.'

She thought he was serious, but she could never be quite sure with Lucifer and she looked at him uncertainly for a moment before shaking her head slowly, her eyes lowered while she spoke. 'I - I wish I knew you better,' she said, almost without realizing what she said, and his hands reached out for hers and covered them tightly, the strong fingers curling round hers like a vice.

'You wouldn't like what you found, *carissima*,' he told her softly, while Isobel's heart beat a rapid and uneasy tattoo under her ribs.

He made no effort to explain this rather enigmatic remark, but dismissed the moment of solemnity with a determination that allowed no argument. It would be useless, she thought, to ever try to understand him.

They took their time over the meal because, as Lucifer said, they had no one to please but themselves, and Isobel enjoyed herself, chattering gaily, despite Lucifer's teasing that would, at any other time, have made her silent.

It was while they sat over their coffee at the end of the meal that she noticed a swift flick of surprise on Lucifer's face and a moment later he got to his feet, smiling broadly, while Isobel looked round to see who it was behind her. Her gaze clashed with the malevolent amber eyes of Vanessa Law and for one wild, unreasoning instant she felt fear. A sickening cold fear that clutched at her stomach like a tangible thing, so that she instinctively put a hand to cover it.

The thin gauntly striking face had little or no colour even on such a warm day, and there was not a black hair out of place on the high-piled coiffure. Her dress, too, as it had been the first time Isobel

saw her, was of some dark material that clung to her thin figure and looked most unsuitable for a hot summer's day, but at the same time made it impossible to overlook her, even in a crowd. And that, Isobel thought a little uncharitably, was probably part of the exhibitionism that made up a good deal of Vanessa Law's character.

'Lucifer *darling*, I didn't expect to see you here.' The rather harsh voice drew several curious eyes and Isobel felt a curl of embarrassment which Lucifer apparently did not share.

He smiled at the woman and raised a brow. 'Hello, Vanessa, lunching alone?'

He looked behind her, seeking a companion, and Vanessa pursed her lips, inclining her head carelessly at a table some distance away where a short, stout man sat alone and looking rather sheepish. 'I'm with Freddy Gains,' she said, 'but I told him to wait for me at the table when I spotted you. He bores me silly,' she confided, 'but I thought *you* were busy, my darling.'

Lucifer ignored the jibe and smiled at Isobel. 'You've met Isobel, haven't you?' he asked politely, and Vanessa Law nodded shortly, no doubt reading her own interpretation into the question.

'I didn't realize you were coming into Edgemorton today,' she told him, 'and I certainly didn't know you'd be lunching here. Why didn't you let me know?'

'I never thought about it,' Lucifer informed her blandly, and even Isobel felt a swift pang of pity for the look of hurt that showed briefly in the other woman's eyes. Lucifer could be horribly cruel when he felt like it. Either that or he was unaware of how Vanessa felt about him, and she could not believe that.

'Well, you should have,' Vanessa scolded him. 'You know I love this place and you haven't taken me to lunch for ages.'

He shrugged. 'As you said,' he told her, 'I've been busy. Haven't I, Isobel?'

'Oh - oh yes, you have,' Isobel agreed, not daring to add his first name in front of Vanessa Law.

'Busy with your wretched book, I suppose,' Vanessa jeered, though she smiled when she said it. 'You never let up, do you, darling?'

'Why should I?' Lucifer asked. 'I enjoy work.' The black eyes turned to Isobel and he smiled. 'I enjoy my work very much, in fact.'

To Isobel the meeting had gone on far too long and she could almost feel the malice that emanated from Vanessa Law, as she watched every move and word Lucifer made. Isobel shivered involuntarily, her lightheartedness quite gone, the clawing coldness in the pit of her stomach again when the amber eyes turned on her.

'I see you still employ Miss Hendrix,' she said quietly, and Lucifer smiled.

'Of course,' he agreed. 'She's the best secretary I've ever had, and she's decorative too, what more can any man ask?'

'I wouldn't know, darling.' The cat-like eyes looked up -at him possessively. 'When are you coming to see me again?' she asked. 'It's weeks now since I saw anything of you.'

The statement so surprised Isobel that she looked at the thin, dark face curiously. Surely Lucifer would not absent himself for so long from his usual haunts unless - unless he was seeing another woman. Having yet another affair. She bit her lip and was surprised to find herself unwilling to accept the idea.

'I've been very busy,' Lucifer repeated. 'You know mine isn't a nine-to-five job, Van.'

'Don't call me Van!' Her vehemence crackled sharply on Isobel's nerves, but the moment was short-lived and a second later she smiled reproachfully, a hand on his arm. 'You know I don't like it,' she told him.

Lucifer grinned unconcernedly. 'I forgot,' he said, obviously untruthful. He looked across at the man seated at the other table waiting for Vanessa and raised an expressive brow. 'Hadn't you better go and join Freddy?' he asked. 'He looks as if he's about to die of the miseries.'

'Lucifer—'

'You don't want him to get up and leave you on your own do you?' he asked, and Vanessa was silent for a moment, seeing herself beaten, Isobel thought, but reluctant to recognize it.

'I'd better go,' she said at last. The amber eyes turned on Isobel again and she held her gaze until Isobel shivered at the malice she saw there. 'How's Nigel?' she asked meaningly.

'He's very much better, Mrs. Law.' She knew she sounded stiffly formal, but her throat felt tight and dry and she only wished for that malicious gaze to be withdrawn.

'Shall we be hearing wedding bells soon?'

The question was so unexpected that Isobel could only stare at her for a moment or two and it was Lucifer who answered for her. 'It's much too soon for wedding bells yet,' he informed Vanessa with an air of certainty that surprised Isobel as much as it did Vanessa. 'Isobel's far too much of a baby to be tied down to domesticity.'

'Oh.' Vanessa looked from one to the other, her eyes looking genuinely puzzled, while Isobel, for some inexplicable reason, was

obliged to smother an insane desire to laugh. 'I rather thought it was more or less settled,' Vanessa said.

Lucifer shook his head, his eyes blackly wicked. 'Nothing's settled,' he informed her profoundly, 'until it happens.'

The following silence could have been cut with a knife and Isobel wondered, somewhat dizzily, what would happen next. It was Vanessa who spoke, seeing the futility of further questioning. 'I'd better be going,' she said again, and Lucifer, taking her at her word, sat down to resume his leisurely lunch.

'Goodbye, Van.'

He poured himself more coffee and Isobel watched the tall, thin gauntness of Vanessa Law move smoothly across the restaurant towards her neglected partner, unable to do anything about the unbidden sense of pity she felt for her.

She lowered her gaze when she turned and met Lucifer's black eyes watching her curiously. 'You don't have to, you know,' he told her, and she shook her head slowly, knowing he had seen and recognized the momentary pity she felt for Vanessa.

'You 're cruel and — and unfeeling,' she told him in a voice that sounded a little breathless, 'and I'd *hate* to be in love with you!'

CHAPTER NINE

Despite Nigel's complaints that he was not yet able to - walk more than the length of the garden without discomfort and he liked her to stay with him, Isobel often went for quite long walks alone and, in fact, quite enjoyed the solitude of the meadows that spread out around Kanderby House like a pattern of every shade of green and yellow. Sunday morning was her favourite time for walking and she loved to hear the distant summons of some hidden church bell as she made her way through the warm-smelling fields scattered thickly with buttercups and clover.

On previous Sunday walks she had noticed a beautiful old Cotswold-stone house, tucked away behind a cluster of ancient elms and standing in an almost straight line, as the crow flies, behind Kanderby House. With the little she knew about architecture she had decided that it dated from Tudor times or perhaps even earlier, and it stood, mellowed and quiet, as if it basked in the hot sun. Enthusiastic mention of it had produced the information that it belonged to Vanessa Law and was part of the vast inheritance left to her by her late husband.

Learning that had discouraged Isobel from a vague idea she had had of one day walking right up to the old house and openly admiring it. She would never have dared do such a thing with Vanessa Law in occupation.

Seeing the house now, in the mellowness of summer, Isobel found it hard to picture it either as Vanessa Law's home or as the headquarters of a rather bizarre club that both she and Lucifer belonged to. Nothing looked less like a home for witchcraft, although she supposed that on a dark night and with a north-east wind howling across the open land around it, it could look quite alarmingly different. She wondered, too, how many and much more serious witching ceremonies the old house

had seen within its walls than the mere curiosity of a group of inquiring minds.

Both Lucifer and Mrs. Grayson had assured her that as long as she kept a respectable distance from the house, no one would mind her walking in the fields, and she had done so on several occasions. She always gave the house a wide berth, although she was more than ever curious about it since she had learned to whom it belonged.

The tall slim chimneys of the house showed, softly yellow, against the blue sky and above the tops of the trees which were on slightly lower ground, and once again Isobel's curiosity was aroused. Just once she would love to go closer to it and really be able to see it, but the thought of perhaps being caught by Vanessa Law deterred her today as it always did.

The village of Green End itself lay in the opposite direction altogether, so that there was little likelihood of her meeting anyone else, and she walked slowly, enjoying the sun and the smell of the drying grass and clover. It was idyllic, she thought, almost too idyllic, for she could never quite decide what there was about the charming and beautiful countryside that gave her a feeling of unrest. It was almost as if she had strayed into some lovely, alien land and might at any moment come across the unexpected.

Adding to the sensation of unreality were seven tall, roughly hewn stone pillars that seemed to grow out of the summery meadow, ugly and somehow menacing. She looked across at them warily as she usually did when she passed them, scolding herself for being ridiculously fanciful, but they always seemed ominous even in the bright sunshine. She remembered Nigel's reluctant and half- scornful explanation for them being there.

They were, he had informed her, supposed to be the seven witches of Greenwick, a village on the other side of the hill, and they had been

magically turned into stone when they attempted to initiate the young sister of a good priest into their coven.

It was, of course, all utter nonsense and she had laughed when Nigel told her the story, but nevertheless she always kept a wary eye on the huge yellow pillars of stone whenever she passed them, and wondered how they really came to be standing there, solid and gloomy, in that tranquil meadow.

She could never quite Suppress the shiver that trickled icily along her spine, and she thought ruefully how Lucifer would have laughed at her and pointed out, yet again, how powerful psychology and auto-suggestion could be.

She passed the seven witches and went on towards the promising shade of trees only a few yards ahead. It was so quiet and peaceful that the soft sound of voices immediately drew her attention, growing more plain as she walked on. There was, she decided, something vaguely familiar about both voices, although she could distinguish no actual words.

The very fact that there was someone else abroad, however, made her cautious and she decided to go no further than the few extra steps that would bring her to the edge of the trees where they curved round as the spinney widened. Then she would turn round and go back before she was seen and perhaps accused of trespassing.

Knowing how sound carries in the open country, she had anticipated that the talkers would be some distance off -yet, perhaps somewhere deeper in to the spinney, and hidden from her view. Coming upon them suddenly as she did, when she walked to the curving edge of the trees, she blinked in surprise, for there were two people so close that she felt sure they must have seen her.

Only the fact that they were so engrossed in their own affairs kept them from paying her more notice. The man Isobel recognized as Gal Ford, the artist who had sketched her portrait at the County Show, and there was certainly no mistaking the sleekly coiled black hair of Vanessa Law.

Obviously she had been riding, for a big bay mare stood waiting patiently nearby, but whether the meeting had been accidental or planned was debatable. Certainly it was not the sort of place one would normally expect to meet people except by arrangement, and Cal Ford had frankly admitted to being no country-lover.

Their actions, too, spoke of a rendezvous rather than accidental meeting. The man, not so much taller than his companion, held her in his arms, the knuckles of his fingers showing bone-white as he held her tight, his mouth covering hers in a kiss that held them both silent for as long as it took Isobel to register the scene and then draw back hastily behind the trees again.

A low, blatantly seductive laugh reached her a moment later and the sound of the man's harsh, erratic breathing, reminding Isobel of Lucifer's half-scornful pity for the man's obvious infatuation for Vanessa. She wished she could turn and go, leave the intimate scene to the participants and forget she had ever seen them, but before she could move off the mare raised her sensitive nose to the wind and whinnied a warning."

There was nothing for it but to come out into the open; much better that than have Vanessa Law come over and find her there. Cal Ford's artistic eye at once recognized her and he looked both startled and wary.

'It's - it's Miss Henderson, isn't it?' he asked, now standing a restrained two feet away from his companion. 'I remember seeing you with Lucifer Bennetti at the County Show.'

'Hendrix, Mr. Ford, Isobel Hendrix,' she corrected him, uneasily aware of Vanessa Law's strange cat-like eyes fixed on her as she turned her head. 'I'm sorry if I'm trespassing, Mrs. Law,' she said, 'but both Lucifer and Mrs. Grayson said it would be O.K. for me to walk in the fields as long as I didn't go too near the house.'

'That was very generous of them,' Vanessa drawled, her eyes suspicious. Wondering how much I saw, Isobel thought ruefully. 'But I'd call this too near the house, wouldn't you?'

'I - I'm sorry.' Isobel had scarcely expected a welcome, especially in the circumstances, but the sheer malice with which the other woman looked at her sent shivers down her spine.

'Then I suggest you go back where you came from,' Vanessa told her.

'Yes. Yes, of course. I'm sorry, I didn't realize.'

'Realize?' The voice was sharp and almost shrill, and she was far more uneasy, Isobel thought, than she would have expected, until it occurred to her that Vanessa would certainly not want the scene she had just witnessed relayed to Lucifer.

'I - I mean I had no intention of intruding on your privacy.'

'Then don't,' Vanessa said shortly. 'I'll inform Lucifer that I object to having every little chit he employs being given the free run of my land.'

'But I had no—' Isobel began, and was waved to silence by a dismissing hand.

'Oh, spare me the excuses, for heaven's sake,' Vanessa snapped, 'and in future stay away from my property.'

It was not just the land they stood on either, Isobel thought, that was included in that autocratic order, but if Vanessa's relationship with Lucifer was so precious to her why was she here with Cal Ford? Almost automatically she glanced at the artist where he stood, eyes downcast and half-ashamed of his silence.

Isobel shook her head slowly. 'I certainly shan't come on to your land again, Mrs. Law,' she said. 'Good morning.' She looked again at Cal'Ford. 'Goodbye, Mr. Ford.'

She turned around and would have walked off, but Vanessa had apparently read something more into her answer, and she called her back. 'Miss Hendrix!' Isobel turned again, reluctantly, and met the slitted eyes that regarded her suspiciously. 'Just don't get too ambitious,' Vanessa told her, after a brief silence. 'Lucifer Bennetti is far more than a silly chit like you can handle.'

The crude, obvious warning made Isobel crawl with embarrassment, but she lifted her chin, her cheeks flushed and angry, almost unconsciously noting Cal Ford's halfhearted attempt to stem any further abuse.

'I only have ambitions to be a good secretary, Mrs. Law,' she informed her. 'I leave anything else to you.' She looked meaningly at the artist, miserably inadequate in the situation he found himself in, and Vanessa Law's strange eyes glittered angrily.

'I don't know how long you've been sneaking behind trees,' she warned, 'but if you're wise, you'll forget you've seen anything here this morning.'

Isobel shook her head, anxious to be gone. 'It doesn't concern me.'

'You're right, it doesn't.' She walked towards Isobel, who felt a sudden urgent desire to run as fast as she could away from there. 'If you mention one word of what you've seen, or think you've seen, to

Lucifer,' she said quietly, her voice as hard and chill as steel, 'you'll besorry, Miss Hendrix, believe me, you'll be very, very sorry.'

Isobel's nerves tingled warningly and she found it difficult to summon even enough courage to turn her back on the menace that looked at her from Vanessa Law's eyes. She began walking away, her chin high, even though her knees felt as weak as water and threatened to collapse under her at any minute.

It was cowardly and ridiculous to feel so afraid, she told herself, out here in the open with the sun shining warmly on her back, but that steady, malignant gaze had held more than a threat of physical danger and, at the moment, she could believe almost anything possible.

The smooth silky black head and the strange, disturbing amber-coloured eyes were all too familiar in another enemy of hers, and for one crazy, incredible moment she could have believed that she was again face to face with a big, black, malicious-eyed cat, called Pyewacket, who sat contentedly enough in Lucifer's arms, but lashed out viciously when Isobel tried to make friends with her.

Isobel said nothing to Lucifer about her ignominious retreat from Vanessa's anger, but she did tell Nigel about it when they were alone that evening and sitting on the bench at the end of the garden.

Now free of strapping of any sort on his legs, but still needing a stick to help him to walk, Nigel was getting about much better now, and had even been driven to London once or twice to his office. He had been annoyed because Isobel had refused to ask Lucifer for the time off to go with him, but it would not be right, she explained to him, to expect special privileges just because he was Lucifer's brother. It would not be very long now, she thought ruefully, before he asked her about moving back to Frome's and leaving her job with Lucifer, and she was determined to be firm about it.

'I never knew Vanessa had an interest in anyone else but Luke,' he told her, when she mentioned Cal Ford. 'Although I know he's been potty about her for years. I was told so by a mutual acquaintance,' he added, when he saw her curious frown. 'Quite frankly, darling, you surprise me when you say that Vanessa was a willing partner.'

'Can you imagine her being a partner at all if she *wasn't* willing?' Isobel asked dryly. 'I'm not sure whether I'm surprised or not, although I knew Cal Ford was what you call potty about her.'

'Did you?' He arched a curious brow. 'You're very knowledgeable about such matters, considering. How do *you* know?'

Isobel shrugged. 'Something Lucifer said when we saw Cal Ford at the County Show last month,' she said. 'Lucifer said he was a fool, but it wasn't so much what he said as the way he said it. I just got the impression that he knew the man was in love with Vanessa and he thought him a fool for it. Being Lucifer, of course,' she added, 'he didn't think twice about telling what he thought.'

'No,' Nigel agreed, 'he wouldn't.' He frowned over something else she had said, and looked at her curiously. 'I didn't know you knew Cal Ford,' he said.

'I met him at the show, as I said. I didn't imagine you knew him either, I thought he belonged to Lucifer's world, not yours.'

'He does,' Nigel agreed. 'I met him once, though, and I thought he was rather an odd bird. What was he doing at the show? I thought he was strictly a town-dweller.'

Isobel made a wry face. 'As far as I could gather he was killing two birds with one stone,' she told him. 'He was working, doing sketches and selling them, and hoping to see Vanessa while he was there.'

'Oh, I see. I've heard he's a very clever artist, though I've never seen any of his stuff.' He smiled at her. 'If I'd known he was going to be there and working, I'd have got you to have had a drawing of yourself done.'

'Oh, but he did—' She bit her lip hastily, remembering too late who had both commissioned and kept the rather good sketch of her that Cal Ford had drawn.

Nigel's eyes narrowed suspiciously. '*Did* he do one, Isobel?'

There was no other way but to answer him truthfully, she realized, for if she denied it now he would almost surely ask Lucifer about it, and Lucifer, she felt sure, would have no qualms about admitting to possession of it.

'Yes, he did, actually,' she said, not looking at him.

'And you didn't say anything about it,' he accused.

She shrugged, hoping to make it appear far less important than he was bent on making it. 'I didn't think it was worth special mention,' she told him.

'Have you still got it?' She shook her head. 'Why not? Wasn't it any good?'

'Oh yes, it was very good.'

'Then why—'

'It wasn't mine to keep,' she said, a little impatiently, for she was tired of being questioned.

When she looked at him again, his eyes were a deep, dark blue in the evening light and it was difficult to judge what he was thinking, but

there was a familiar warning tightness about his mouth. 'I don't need more than one guess to know who *has* got it,' he told her, and she sighed.

'It was Lucifer's idea to have it done,' she told him. 'I think he felt sorry for Cal Ford one way and another, and he wanted to kelp.'

Nigel's lip curled dubiously. 'Charity isn't Luke's strong point that I know of,' he said bluntly. 'And if he wanted to help Cal Ford, he needn't have kept the drawing. Why did you let him, Isobel?'

She looked a little surprised at the question. 'I had very little option,' she declared, truthfully enough. 'You know what Lucifer's like, and anyway, he paid for it, so I couldn't very well lay claim to it.'

'What I want to know,' Nigel murmured darkly, 'is why the hell he wanted it in the first place.'

She pondered on that question herself for a minute or two. 'I don't know,' she admitted at last. 'Maybe he just liked the picture.'

'Or maybe he wanted it for some wretched trickery at that idiotic club of theirs.'

Isobel looked briefly uneasy. 'Oh no, Nigel, that's silly.'

'Is it?' He shrugged. 'They get up to some pretty silly things as far as I can gather, and I wouldn't put anything past him.'

'Well, I'm quite sure he wouldn't use a perfectly harmless drawing of me to - to raise his devils or whatever it is they do. It's ridiculous!'

'I suppose so,' he allowed grudgingly. 'But I would like to know why he had it.'

'Well, it was rather a good drawing,' she said, and Nigel snorted his opinion of that idea.

'I've never known him as patron of the arts either,' he remarked, and Isobel felt a flash of rising temper at his determined ill-humour.

'It's quite likely still rolled up into a tube the way he carried it home,' she retorted. 'And I really don't see why you're making so much fuss about a - a hasty sketch.'

'It's his reason for having it that I'm questioning,' Nigel insisted. 'And I wasn't aware that I *was* making a fuss about it.'

'Well, you are.'

They were silent for several minutes, a brittle uneasy silence, then Nigel leaned over and took her hand in his, making her turn and face him. 'If I'm fussing, darling, there's good reason for it,' he told her, 'but I didn't want to upset you. I'm sorry.'

Isobel sighed. 'Oh, I'm not upset, it isn't worth that, it just seemed a bit like making a mountain out of a molehill that's all.'

He kissed her mouth, his eyes apologetic. 'Well, anyway, I'm sorry.' He put an arm round her shoulders and hugged her up close to him on the bench seat. 'It won't be long now,' he told her, 'and I'll be back full time at the works and we can both get away from the - the rather dangerous atmosphere of this place.'

'Oh, but it's lovely here,' Isobel objected, and leaned away from him to look up into his eyes, feeling a strangely uneasy beat in her heart suddenly. 'And I'm not at all sure that I'm coming back to Frome's, Nigel.'

He looked at her as if he found it impossible to believe he had heard her aright. 'But of course you will,' he told her. 'This arrangement was only temporary, you knew that.'

'I didn't,' she denied firmly. 'You said nothing at all about it being temporary.'

'But surely you understood that,' he insisted. 'It was only while I was here and I wanted you here with me.'

'You didn't point that out to me or to Lucifer,' she told him.

'Lucifer?' he asked, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. 'What the hell has it got to do with Luke?'

'Everything, I should think,' Isobel retorted. 'He happens to be my employer and he pays me very well. Also,'-she added, 'I happen to like my job.'

'You - you mean you want to stay on?' She nodded firmly. 'Even after I'm gone?'

'Yes. Oh, Nigel, be reasonable. I have a great deal to lose by leaving here.'

'Including me,' Nigel said gloomily.

'That's silly,' Isobel told him shortly, 'and you know it. It isn't as if this is the end of the world, it's only quite a short journey from London by car and you could see me every week-end, if you wanted to.'

'You know I want to.'

'Then why are you making so much fuss about my staying?' she asked reasonably. 'After all, I only ever saw you about two or three evenings a week when I was in town, so if you come here each week-end I shall

see you for actually longer than I did then, and I know Mrs. Grayson will be delighted to have you here more often.'

'I know she will,' he allowed, but he still had that discontented look that showed how much he disliked the idea of leaving her behind here. 'But I saw you all day as well,' he said at last, insistently. 'Isobel - *please* won't you reconsider? For my sake?'

She shook her head. 'I - I told you, Nigel, that I need more time to think about - about what you asked me, and I think that being away from you for a bit will give me the chance I need to know how I really feel.' She smiled at him wryly. 'See how much I shall miss you when you're not here.'

'I suppose you're right,' he allowed grudgingly. 'I did promise not to rush you, didn't I?'

'You did.' She smiled at his sober face. 'We'll both have more opportunity to find out whether absence really does make the heart grow fonder, or if it merely breeds indifference.'

'It certainly won't breed indifference as far as I'm concerned,' Nigel assured her confidently, and Isobel wished she could have been so certain.

CHAPTER TEN

It was several days after her rather eventful meeting with Vanessa that Isobel again got into difficulties with Vanessa Law's cat, Pyewacket, and yet again, it was Lucifer who came to her aid. It was while she was alone in the office, working on some rather worse than usual manuscript, that something caught her eye.

She glanced up, startled by the sudden movement, and saw the huge black cat standing on the sill by the open window. Its back was arched and the malevolent yellow eyes, so like its mistress's, watched her steadily and very disconcertingly. Lucifer was still not back from lunch or she would not have bothered herself, but left the cat's eviction to him; as it was she got up from her chair and approached it cautiously.

'Shoo!' she told it, clapping her hands together discouragingly. 'Go away, you horrible great brute. Go home!'

Pyewacket looked at her, unmoved and quite unafraid, her smooth black back still arched threateningly. 'Go away!' Isobel told her sharply, hoping to impress the animal with her sternness. 'Go home!'

She reached out, meaning to use a bit of gentle persuasion, since verbal command seemed to be having no effect. She put her hands round the sleek, furry body and pushed gently towards the open window. 'Go on,' she instructed, 'good pussy, go home. Go home, Pyewacket, or whatever your silly name is.'

It was not to be as simple as that, however, for the cat resisted her efforts and in no uncertain manner. It turned, spitting furiously, one paw raised to lash out with claws extended, drawing blood with one-vicious rake down Isobel's right arm. She dropped the cat with a yell, instinctively putting the injured arm to her mouth while she stared at

her assailant in momentary fear. 'You vicious brute!' she told it, while it glared at her maliciously. 'That's twice you've scratched me!'

Pyewacket stood her ground, her tail swishing back and forth in righteous anger, yellow eyes narrowed in warning against further liberties. Isobel stood for a moment, indecisive, then stubbornness made her determined not to let a mere cat have the last word, and she waved her hands and tried her original methods again. 'Shoo!' she said firmly. 'Shoo! Go home, you horrible, spiteful great monster moggie, go home to your mistress and - and scratch *her*...'

She was so occupied with getting rid of her unwelcome visitor that she did not hear the door open, and it was not until she heard the laugh that greeted her uncharitable exhortation to the cat that she realized Lucifer was there, and turned round. She looked a bit sheepish at being caught so openly hostile to Vanessa, and he smiled knowingly.

'Are you having trouble with Vanessa's Pye again?' he asked, and came across to the window, picking up the cat, who promptly became all soft and kittenish, closing her yellow eyes ecstatically when he rubbed her throat with his strong fingers.

'She hates me,' Isobel told him, glaring at the cat resentfully, 'and I've never done anything to harm *her*. She just doesn't like me, for some reason or other.'

'She's just jealous, as I told you before,' he said. 'Aren't you, Pye?'

'But all soft and fussy with you,' Isobel retorted, so indignantly that he laughed and pushed the cat unceremoniously out of the window.

'It sounds to me as if the dislike's mutual,' he told her. 'Don't you like cats?'

'I like cats,' Isobel informed him, 'but I'm not at all sure that *that* thing is just a common or garden moggie as you claim.'

'Oh?' He gave Pyewacket a discouraging jab in the ribs when she attempted to come back through the open window, and Isobel looked vaguely uneasy.

'Oh, it's ridiculous, of course, and I *know* it is. The trouble is when she looks at me with those great, evil-looking yellow eyes I can believe she's anything from a - a wild animal to a reincarnated witch, which only goes to show how strong the power of persuasion is.'

'Or how strong your imagination is,' he teased. His laughter did little to pacify her, but at least he did something about the cat. He gave it a none too gentle shove and pushed her off the sill down on to the garden outside. 'Go on, you prowling fusspot,' he told the indignant Pyewacket, 'go back where you belong!'

Isobel leaned forward in the window, watching the cat move off reluctantly along the drive. It turned once to look back at her with its yellow eyes narrowed and spiteful so that she drew back her head hastily. The scratches on her arm were much worse than before and ran from elbow to wrist, red and angry-looking.

Lucifer looked at them, tut-tutting impatiently, as if he considered it as much her fault as the cat's. 'You just don't learn, do you?' he asked. 'Come on through to the bathroom and I'll mop you up.'

'There's no need to mop me up,' Isobel told him shortly. 'I'll survive with a hankie tied round it until it stops bleeding.' She had never been through into the rest of the cottage and somehow she shied nervously away from the idea now.

He made no effort to argue with her but simply put a hand firmly in the middle of her back and propelled her through the door and on into the hall, with no more ceremony than he had shown when evicting her attacker.

'You,' he informed her briefly as they went, 'argue far too much - it's a distressing habit in the young. Beppo!' The last was yelled at his manservant who appeared with remarkable speed from the kitchen, his eyes curious, noting the marks on Isobel's arm.

'Si, signore?'

There followed a string of what was presumably instructions in, to Isobel, rapid and unintelligible Italian, then the man disappeared again to return a few minutes later with a first aid box. He made what Isobel took to be an offer to help, but Lucifer dismissed it briefly and turned to her again.

'In here,' he told her, and opened the door of a small but luxurious bathroom.

'I wish you wouldn't make so much fuss about it,' Isobel protested. 'I know it was my own fault, and you're right, I *don't* learn. Not where that wretched cat's concerned anyway, but I'm not mortally wounded.'

'Why don't you just stop talking for just a *few* minutes and sit down on that stool?' Lucifer asked, as if his patience was fast running out, and he opened the lid of the first aid box, frowning over the contents.

'But I-'

'Shush!'

'Lucifer, I'm not—' She stopped when he drew a very deep breath and looked at her steadily for a moment before launching into a spate of rapid Italian that lasted for several seconds, while Isobel sat and looked at him wide-eyed.

'Now sit down and shut up!' he told her.

She looked at him silently for a moment, then smiled mischievously. 'Si, P—' A warning glint in his eyes cut short the reply that had proved so provocative before and instead she giggled briefly before subsiding on to the stool.

'That's better,' he approved, and bent over to look at her arm. He bathed it gently, although the stuff he used on it stung sharply for a few seconds, while Isobel eyed him curiously.

'What did all that mean?' she asked after a minute or two.

He grinned at her ruefully. 'I hope you never know,' he told her. 'I can safely cuss at you in Italian because I know you don't understand what I'm saying and therefore you don't know how uncomplimentary I'm being.'

'I can guess,' Isobel retorted, surveying her wounds. 'You're *not* going to bandage it?' she added a few seconds later when he produced a roll of white cotton from the box and proceeded to bind it round and round her arm with a dexterity that surprised her.

'Of course I am, to give that stuff a chance to work.'

She surveyed the stark white wrapping with disfavour. 'It looks as if I've broken it at least,' she complained, and he shook his head slowly as he put the things back into the first aid box.

'Stop complaining, you ungrateful little wretch,' he told her, and grinned at her suddenly. 'You and Nigel can compare notes now,' he added, 'and see who moans most.'

Isobel looked at him indignantly for a second, then met the wicked glint in his eyes and almost inevitably smiled. 'I'm-sorry if I sound ungrateful,' she said. 'I'm not, really. Thank you for dressing my war wounds.'

'You're welcome, but if I were you I'd give Pyewacket a wide berth in future, certainly don't attempt to pick her up again.'

'I won't, don't worry,' Isobel assured him fervently.

'Good. She's obviously chosen you as the object of her special hate and she'll probably swipe at you again if she gets the chance, so don't give it to her.'

'Does she treat every female like that?' Isobel asked curiously, and Lucifer smiled, walking with her back to the office.

'Not every one,' he said. 'That's why I said she seems to have singled you out.'

'Why?'

She looked at him suddenly more serious, some idiotic fear striking coldly at her heart as she recalled the awful similarity between Vanessa Law and the big black cat. Both of them appeared to hate her with equal intensity, and she had the uneasy feeling that it was for the same reason - Lucifer.

'Who knows?' he said, and shrugged. 'Now forget Pyewacket and Vanessa and let's get on with some more work, shall we?'

It was only as she rolled the first page of paper into her machine that she realized he had mentioned Vanessa and the cat in the same breath, almost as if he had followed her thoughts, and she shivered again at the coincidence.

It was later that day, after she had finished work, that Isobel sat with Nigel and tried to explain how her arm came to be so badly scratched. 'It's not nearly as bad as it looks,' she told him, when he exclaimed at

the sight of it. 'It's because Lucifer insisted on putting this wretched bandage on it that it looks so serious.'

'It must be pretty bad,' Nigel told her, 'for Luke to have made so much fuss. He's not given to being over concerned about anyone.'

'Well, it isn't, I assure you,' she said. 'Underneath this bandaging it's just a cat scratch, pure and simple.'

'Pure and simple?' He questioned her meaning with one raised brow and she laughed, determined to have no more fuss made about it.

'Well, maybe it's a bit deep and it was rather messy because it bled a lot,' she admitted, 'but it really doesn't warrant so much fuss being made and it certainly *doesn't* warrant all this bandage wound round it.'

'Have you something on it beside the bandage?' Nigel asked, as if he mistrusted his brother's ministrations.

She smiled. 'Yes, I have. He used some horrible stuff that stung like fury and felt worse than Pyewacket's claws when he first put it on, although it's much better now. He's a very efficient doctor.'

'He should be,' Nigel retorted, as if he parted with the information only reluctantly. 'He did three years as a medical student and then changed his mind.'

'Did he?' Isobel absorbed the new piece of information thoughtfully. 'I wonder why.'

'God knows,' Nigel said impatiently. 'He said something about not being cut out for it. Personally I believe him.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Isobel mused, then hastily recalled herself, reproached by his frown of disapproval.

'That damned cat seems to follow you around,' he told her. 'You must have a fascination for it.'

Isobel shook her head. 'It's not me who's the attraction,' she denied. 'It's Lucifer, she's as potty about him as her mistress is.'

'Vanessa?' He raised a doubtful brow. 'Is Vanessa potty about him?' he asked, obviously doubting it.

'Very definitely.'

'I'd have said she was more possessive than anything else.' He seemed prepared to argue the point and she thought ruefully that another hot day had done nothing to improve his temper. 'Although,' he admitted, 'she has to take a back seat every so often when he takes a fancy to someone else.'

Isobel nodded quite convinced she was right. 'Oh, she very definitely is potty about him,' she assured him. 'She's in love with him, Nigel, it's not just possessiveness, I've seen her face and the hurt look in her eyes when he's been thoughtless in what he says to her.'

Nigel looked at her for a moment thoughtfully. 'You seem to have been very observant,' he remarked, and almost made it sound like a vice he disapproved of.

'Not really,' Isobel denied. 'I just happened to notice the way she looked, that's all. I thought it was - well, rather out of character for her, but it showed, quite plainly, for just a second, when they were talking once.'

'Hmm.' He rubbed his chin, his eyes thoughtful. 'That's quite a revelation.'

'I thought so,' Isobel said quietly. 'Actually I felt quite sorry for her for a few seconds.'

'It wouldn't be for very long, I can imagine,' he said wryly.

She looked at him for a moment, curious and only half serious. 'As a matter of fact,' she said, watching his face to see what his reaction would be to the suggestion, 'I wondered why, if she's so practised in the arts of witchcraft, she didn't concoct some weird brew that would make sure he stayed with her and didn't go wandering off after someone else all the time.'

'Good grief!' Nigel exclaimed, in something akin to horror. 'You're not seriously suggesting that she'd use a - a love-potion or whatever it is they brew up, are you?'

'Why not?' Isobel asked defensively, and he stared at her for a moment, shaking his head slowly in disbelief.

'Because you surely don't believe in such things, Isobel, you're not so naive.'

'Of course *I'm*, not,' Isobel agreed with a smile, 'but Vanessa Law's supposed to believe in it, isn't she?'

'Not believe in it, no,' he denied. 'They merely study the old witchcraft methods with the object of discovering how they were made to work - or appear to work, because obviously they didn't in fact, it was all psychological.'

'So Lucifer says.'

'Well, for once I agree with him.' He looked at her narrowly. 'Don't you believe it's all psychological chicanery?'

'Yes, I told you I believe, but I'm not at all sure that Vanessa does.'

He was silent for a moment, as if the idea gave him food for thought, then he shook his head. 'I find it hard to believe that a woman like

Vanessa is *that* gullible,' he remarked at last. 'What makes you think she is?'

Isobel shrugged, not really prepared to put her meaning into words. 'I don't know exactly,' she said. 'It's just - just the way she behaves generally. She even dresses the part. Those dark dresses and the high-piled black hair, which doesn't really suit her but which - well, gives her an odd look, all weirdly exotic. You said yourself, she gives you the creeps.'

'So she does,' Nigel admitted, 'but I hadn't gone very deeply into the reason for it.' He was thoughtfully silent again for a while, then he looked at her with eyes that had a curiously blank look, as if the full meaning of what she had said had only just penetrated. 'Good God!' he said, half under his breath, 'it doesn't bear thinking about in this day and age.'

'It's - it's nonsense, of course,' Isobel said, a bit uncertainly for she was not at all sure that she had not raised some devil of her own by starting this conversation.

'Of course,' he echoed, and was silent for so long that she felt sure he must be taking her seriously about Vanessa. After a while, however, he seemed determined to shake the idea and he shrugged his shoulders, leaning across to take her hand in his. 'Oh well, I suppose she and Luke will sort out their own salvation one of these days,' he said, and Isobel nodded absently. He smiled at her serious face and squeezed her hand. 'You're very preoccupied tonight,' he told her. 'Is it your arm?'

'My arm?' She blinked for a moment. 'Oh no, no, that's O.K. Just a bit sore, that's all.'

'And he didn't offer to give you any time off to recover, I suppose?'

Isobel smiled wryly at him. 'Would you have done?' she asked. 'For a cat scratch?'

He shook his head. 'No, I suppose not,' he admitted. 'But if it isn't because your arm's paining you, what's making you so thoughtful?'

She shrugged. 'I didn't know I was.' That wasn't quite true, in fact, for ever since she had left the cottage that afternoon there had been a strange sense of uneasiness troubling her that she could neither identify fully nor find a reason for.

'You've had an air of not-quite-with-me, all evening,' he told her, and she smiled apologetically. 'And I'm wondering if you'd tell me what was worrying you, even if you knew.'

Isobel looked surprised at what sounded almost like an accusation. 'Of course I'd tell you if I knew myself.'

'Would you, darling?' He held on to her hand tightly. 'Or would you run to Lucifer like you did when the prospect of a thunderstorm frightened you?'

She saw his reason at last and shook her head over it. 'I didn't run to him,' she reminded him quietly. 'He ran to me, if you remember, and without my asking.'

'Only because he knew you were frightened,' Nigel insisted. 'And you hadn't seen fit to tell me about your fear.'

She sighed, not prepared to argue that subject again either. 'Oh, please don't let's go into all that again,' she begged. 'I told you how it happened, Nigel, and it's ancient history now.'

For a moment she thought he would carry it further, but then he smiled and kissed her fingers lightly. 'I'm sorry, my darling.'

Isobel shook her head. 'There's no need to be,' she told him, and laughed uncertainly. 'I don't know, it seems to have been a funny sort of day altogether somehow. First that wretched cat scratched me and gave me the creeps, then when I—' She hesitated, wondering if her vague, groundless fears would bring his scorn down on her head.

'When you?' he prompted.

She laughed, trying to make light of it. 'It's really too stupid for words,' she admitted, 'but ever since I left my cottage to come over here, I've had the strangest feeling that - that something's going to happen.'

'Something's going to happen?' It was obvious from the way he repeated her words that he had no conception of how she was feeling and she wished, though she would never dare have admitted it, that he had some of Lucifer's understanding of things that weren't always down to earth and easily explainable.

She shrugged, trying to appear off-hand about it. 'Oh, you know what I mean,' she told him. 'People often say they feel all churned up inside, as if something's going to happen. It seldom does,' she added optimistically.

'Of course it doesn't,' he declared bluntly. 'You're just letting the atmosphere of the place, and Vanessa's ghastly cat, get on your nerves, darling.'

'I suppose so,' Isobel allowed, unconvincingly.

Nigel looked at her sharply, disapproval plain on his good-looking face. 'Well, I hope to heaven you're not going to start believing in that ridiculous hocus-pocus that Luke and Vanessa prattle about,' he told her shortly 'I don't think I could stand it if you went mystic on me, too.'

She flushed, cross because he was so lacking in understanding, and would not even pretend to humour her. 'For heaven's sake,' she told him, 'there's nothing mystic about me. I just said I felt as if something was going to happen, that's all.'

'Well, I hope you're wrong,' he told her shortly. 'Then you'll realize how daft the idea is.'

Mrs. Grayson sat on the other side of the room. She never sat actually with them unless she was specifically brought into the conversation, but made herself as inconspicuous as possible while they spoke quietly together. At the moment, however, she seemed to sense that something was amiss between them and her head was raised, her blue eyes looking across at Isobel inquiringly^ as if she realized her need for understanding.

'Is your arm very painful, Isobel?' she asked, and Isobel knew quite well that the question was only a way of admitting herself to the conversation.

'It's not too bad at all, Mrs. Grayson, thank you,' she said, smiling her thanks.

'I know how it can be,' the old lady said gently, but with a meaningful glance at her grandson. 'With this hot weather an illness or a pain can seem very much worse and it can make one quite crotchety at times, which is quite understandable.'

Nigel glanced sharply from one to the other of them, then pulled a droll face, that was part apologetic. 'I *am* being a bit of a so-and-so, I suppose,' he admitted, and his grandmother smiled reassuringly.

'You did look rather crotchety, dear,' she told him mildly, 'and I suspect you were taking it out on poor Isobel.'

He leaned over and kissed Isobel gently beside her mouth. 'I suppose I was doing that too,' he confessed, 'but the idea of Isobel having mysterious feelings was too much for me to contemplate without objection.'

Mrs. Grayson looked at Isobel inquiringly. 'Are you having mysterious feelings, my dear?' she asked with a smile. 'How very intriguing.'

'Nigel's exaggerating,' Isobel told her. 'I merely said that I felt that - that something was going to happen. You know what I mean,' she added, confident the old lady would be less impatient with her than Nigel had been. 'It's nothing definite and most people feel like it at some time or other.'

'I know exactly what you mean,' Mrs. Grayson agreed. 'I remember that's how Madge was the day before Andy Frome was killed - Nigel's father, you know.'

Isobel looked startled for a moment, especially when she saw the black frown with which Nigel greeted the information. 'She felt - she felt something was going to happen?' she asked, uncertain if it would be wise to pursue the subject in view of Nigel's obvious dislike of it.

Mrs. Grayson nodded. 'She told me the night before, just as she was going to bed, that she felt as if something unpleasant was going to happen, though of course, like most people, she laughed about it, but I could tell it disturbed her.' The old lady sighed deeply. 'Of course with Andy being in the profession he was, it was far more likely to become a fact than most people's intuitions are, and in this case it did. Poor Madge!'

Nigel looked at her narrow-eyed, as if he suspected her of making it up just to support Isobel. 'I never knew about that,' he told her, and the old lady smiled.

'I don't suppose you did, dear,' she told him. 'It isn't the kind of thing one tells one's children about, and especially the very practical little boy that you were.' Her smile took the sting out of the words. 'The very practical person you still are,' she added. 'I think after that, she was always afraid to admit to any such feeling again in case it came true as it did that time, but of course it was mere coincidence as it is with most people.'

'Of course it's coincidence,' Nigel retorted. 'And I've never realized before that Madge was fanciful at all, quite the reverse, in fact.'

'I don't think she is fanciful,' Mrs. Grayson corrected him gently. 'But it did frighten her a little, being such a traumatic experience for her. She was very much in love with your father, you know, dear,' she added, as if that would be some comfort to him.

Nigel's facial expression when Isobel looked at him quite shocked her with its bitterness. 'So much so,' he said sharply, 'that she married John Patterson after only fifteen months of being a widow.'

His grandmother shook her head reproachfully. "You mustn't judge so harshly, Nigel,' she told him softly, regretting the bitterness as if it was directed at herself and not at her daughter. 'Madge is a woman who needs a man to lean on, she never had my independent nature.'

'Hmm.' Isobel had the feeling that, had she not been there, he would have pursued the subject further and not in favour of his mother. She had not known before that Madge Frome had married again so soon after Nigel's father was killed, or that Nigel felt so bitterly about his mother. He had never revealed quite so much to her before, and she wondered, briefly, if Lucifer's opinion of their mother was as uncomplimentary as Nigel's was.

It was sheer disloyalty, she decided a few minutes later, that gave her the idea that Lucifer would be much more tolerant and less ready to condemn.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was quite late when Isobel left the house the following night and made her way along the gravel drive and past the shrubbery to her cottage. The night was clear and cool after a warm day and the earth smelled loamy rich, tickling her nostrils and blending with the perfume of the late flowering roses that grew on the other side of the shrubbery.

A full, fat yellow moon sat in a starless sky and cast long black shadows that danced in front of her all along * the drive, her own shadow, tall and lean, leading her silently on. It was a beautiful night and yet she shivered involuntarily as she turned a corner and her elongated, silent other self moved swiftly round to her left as if trying to lure her from the path and into the rustling mass of rhododendrons and berberis.

She would, at almost any other time, probably have dismissed her own nervousness as sheer fancy, but all evening she had been edgy, plagued by that elusive feeling that something was going to happen. This time, however, she had said nothing to Nigel about it, thinking it rather unwise after his scornful reception of the same instinct last night.

A break in the shrubbery revealed the narrow path leading to her cottage and she breathed a sigh of relief, scolding herself a moment later for being so childishly imaginative. There were times when she viewed with some favour Nigel's wanting her to go back to London with him. At times the atmosphere of this place became almost unbearably overpowering and the full moon merely served to emphasize it.

It was ridiculous to believe in witches and witchcraft, or to think that Vanessa Law's Pyewacket was anything but a perfectly ordinary cat, but on nights like this and in this particular setting she could believe

almost anything was possible. As Lucifer had so often told her, the success of witchcraft depended largely upon creating the right atmosphere and the right state of mind in the prospective victim, and at the moment both existed for her.

The little cottage appeared, small and squat, its square windows winking in the bright moonlight, and she pulled her front door key from her purse as she walked towards it. She had opened the door and switched on the hall light when something caught her eye. It showed whitely in the long beam of light when she turned to close the door and she paused, the blood pounding heavily against her temple although there was nothing as yet to cause it.

How long she stood in the familiar comfort of the hallway looking at it, pale against the rich brown loam beneath the rhododendrons, she had no idea, but she knew she must go and fetch it, whatever it was. It was only feet away and she ventured out at last, across the gravel path and looked down at the grotesque little image at her feet.

She bent and picked it up and, almost as quickly dropped it again when the cold clamminess of clay clung to her fingers. 'Idiot!' she whispered scornfully to herself, and once again retrieved the ugly little figure from the ground, turning it over in her hands, although her instinct was still to throw it as far away as she could and wash her hands to get rid of its clammy coldness. She wondered how long it had lain there unnoticed, and a new kind of fear prickled her scalp, something which she could not yet identify for certain.

Surely if it had been there at lunchtime she would have seen it, or yesterday. If it had laid where it did now she would almost certainly have noticed it. Nevertheless she shivered again, looking at it with eyes wide in disbelief.

She carried it into the lighted hall and studied it more closely. It was several inches tall and the figure itself was crudely modelled from

yellow clay, it was also quite obviously meant to be female. It had a face of sorts and a swathe of blonde hair crowned the hideous features, but it took Isobel only seconds to realize who it was meant to represent.

'Oh no!' she shook her head slowly, a choking panic giving her voice a harsh timbre, and her fingers trembled when they touched the long, sharp pin that stuck up from the arm of the figure. Several long, deep scores ran the whole length of the clay arm and she instinctively put a hand to her own bandaged arm.

She stared at the grotesque effigy of herself with wide, blank eyes, her breathing shallow and erratic, as near to panic as she had ever been in her life. Sheer hatred must have gone into the making of it, and she had no hesitation in allotting the blame to Vanessa Law, for she could think of no one else who hated her enough to indulge in such a vicious and frightening practice.

She held the image at arm's length, her mind going swiftly back to Vanessa Law's warning only a few days before. The flat yellow clay face with its crude features and the swathe of blonde hair that hung down over her hand and felt horribly real was, she felt, the outcome of that warning.

Her head still throbbed in panic and her heart hammered relentlessly at her ribs, then, before she properly realized what she was doing, she sped from the cottage and ran along the gravel drive as fast as her legs would carry her. She did not even pause to consider why she ran on, past Kanderby House, where Nigel's bedroom light still burned, and on to Lucifer's cottage. Nigel would never understand her fear; Lucifer was the only one who would both understand and explain. Neither did it occur to her that she was doing exactly what Vanessa Law had warned her against.

It was nearly midnight, but a light still burned in the hall of the lodge, and she ran straight up to the front door without hesitating, her breathing short and anguished as she rapped urgently on the solid wood. It was only seconds before the door was opened, although it seemed like an eternity to Isobel, and when he saw her face Lucifer drew her quickly into the hall and closed the door before he uttered a word.

'Lucifer, I—'

A strong arm encircled her shoulders. 'Easy now, *cara mia*, easy.' The quiet soothing voice was already helping to calm her and she strove to control her rapid, noisy breathing as he led her, unprotesting, into a room she had never seen before.

His manservant, the liquid-eyed Beppo, looked at her curiously when they came in, but a brief nod from Lucifer dismissed him as she was gently pushed down into an armchair. Lucifer crouched beside her, his black eyes curious but also more gentle and anxious than she had ever seen them. It was when he went to take her hands in his that he saw the effigy she still clutched tightly, and he took it from her unresisting fingers.

He frowned over it for a second or two. 'Where did you get this?' he asked quietly.

Isobel swallowed hard. 'It - it was lying on the garden opposite my cottage,' she explained as best she could for the small trembly voice that issued from her throat, and he nodded, turning the grotesque little figure round in his hand, then surprisingly he smiled.

'It doesn't do you justice, *bella mia*.'

'It - it is *meant* to be me, isn't it?' she asked, and he nodded.

'I should say it's meant to be you,' he agreed calmly with another smile. 'Although I wouldn't have recognized you, to be quite honest.'

'Oh, Lucifer, don't!' she begged. 'Please don't laugh at me.'

He shook his head slowly and she realized that his smile was as gentle and understanding as the look in his eyes. 'I'm not laughing at you, *piccola*,' he said softly.

'I - I know it's idiotic,' she said, seeking to explain her fears. 'I know it's - it's only superstition and I should have more sense than to take it seriously, but—' She looked at him with her grey eyes already shining with tears and looking as vulnerable as a child's. 'I'm - I'm frightened,' she confessed.

'There's nothing to be frightened of,' he told her quietly. 'I've explained it all to you before, Isobel.'

'I know. I - I was just being silly, I *know* that,' she said, half fearing he might lose patience with her.

'Not silly, *bambinella*,' he argued gently, 'just feminine, and no one minds that, most of all me.'

'You didn't - didn't mind my coming here?'

He shrugged as he straightened up from beside her and, for a brief moment, the old devilment glittered in his eyes as he looked down at her. 'Why should I mind?' he asked.

'It - it was just that I was so uncertain and - and so frightened.'

He nodded, understanding, as she had known he would. 'I know,' he said. 'These things are meant to frighten, *piccola*.'

'It's - it's meant to *make* something happen, isn't it?' she asked, and he nodded.

'But it's all nonsense, of course,' he told her, 'and you're not frightened any more, are you?'

It was so difficult to meet his eyes and not feel childish and silly, so she kept her gaze lowered and deliberately looked again at the clay figure that now looked so much less ominous enclosed in his strong fingers. She shook her head. 'Not - not so much,' she said.

'You needed reassurance, is that it, *amante*?' She nodded. 'And you thought I was the best one to come to?' It was obvious what he was carefully avoiding putting into words, and again Isobel nodded realizing for the first time that she had not even given Nigel a thought as she ran past the house.

'I - I knew you'd understand,' she explained. 'You know about these things, Lucifer.'

He looked down at the figure with its long blonde hair and half smiled. 'Yes,' he admitted quietly, 'I know about these things.' He left her side and walked over to sit in another armchair. 'But you knew enough about them to be frightened, didn't you?'

'I know that making an effigy of someone and - and marking it or sticking a pin into -it where you want to do harm is supposed to bring that same injury to the person it represents.' She watched how carelessly he held the effigy by one leg, in contrast to her own almost reverent handling of it.

He looked down at the thing again and laughed shortly. 'It's meant to harm you,' he agreed grimly, then looked across at her challengingly. 'But mostly it's meant to frighten you - which it did. I did warn you what might happen, didn't I, *piccola*?' he added softly.

'That I might get involved in - in this witchcraft thing?' she asked, and he nodded. 'Yes, you did, but I thought it all too far-fetched to be true.'

'And now you know it isn't, hmm?'

'It must have been—' She stopped short, biting her lips, but he knew, as always, what she had been going to say and he smiled wryly as he said it for her.

'Vanessa,' he said bluntly.

Isobel looked uneasy. 'I - I couldn't think who else it could be,' she confessed. She looked up then and frowned for a moment. 'She hates me,' she told him, 'although I've never given her reason to.'

He smiled wryly, gazing at her with that slow, dark look that played havoc with her self-control. 'You're very young and very beautiful,' he said softly, 'that's reason enough. Especially to a woman like Vanessa, who isn't over fond of her own sex anyway.'

'But she has no *need*,' Isobel insisted, and stopped when he shook his head slowly.

'It's possibly my fault, Isobel, and I'm sorry.'

'You're—' She stared at him unbelievably, both the admission and the apology taking her by surprise.

'I shouldn't have—' Expressive hands lent meaning to the unspoken words and for a moment he seemed wholly Latin and much more dangerous. 'I should have realized how young you were and how very, very vulnerable. It was selfish of me.'

'Lucifer—'

He raised a hand to silence her, a trace of the old uncaring insolence in his smile. 'I should leave the *bambini* to Nigel and stay in my own league,' he told her, 'please see that I do in future, will you? Then Vanessa will leave you alone.'

She was sufficiently recovered from her fright to translate and resent his reference to her as a baby and she flushed, lifting her chin, her eyes no longer tearful. 'You don't need to keep referring to me as a - a baby,' she told him, 'and even if I was as old as the hills, Mrs. Law has nothing to fear from me in the way you're implying, as I've already told her.'

'Have you?' His eyes glowed like coals in the yellow light, and Isobel resented what she suspected was admiration of childish pluck in defying the grown-ups. 'No wonder Vanessa made your effigy,' he added, and laughed.

'I saw her on Sunday morning with—' She stopped short of actually betraying the confidence she had accidentally been admitted to, and lowered her eyes hastily before the compelling gaze opposite.

'Cal Ford?' he guessed, and laughed again, while Isobel stared at him wide-eyed.

'I didn't tell you,' she said, suddenly wary.

'I *know* you didn't.' He grinned knowingly. 'And I'll make sure Vanessa knows it wasn't you. You don't want any more dollies on your doorstep, do you?'

Isobel shook her head, reminded of the obscenely grotesque warning again. 'I - I still don't see how she knew about my arm being scratched,' she said slowly. 'It couldn't have - she couldn't have—' She could not go on with the idiotic suspicion that the effigy had been made before the cat's attack on her, but she looked at him appealingly, begging him to confirm that it *was* idiotic. 'The arm of that - that thing

is marked in exactly the same way as her cat marked my arm,' she said.

He shook his head, holding the effigy where she could see it more plainly. "Not quite exactly," he told her quietly. "There's a significant difference, hadn't you noticed?"

She stared at it for a moment, her hand on her own injured arm, then her eyes widened. 'Of course,' she said. 'It's - it's the left arm on there and mine's my right. I didn't notice that.' She shook her head. 'Just the same, Lucifer, it's a coincidence. How did she know about my arm?'

'Because I told her.' She blinked at the blunt statement, and he smiled. 'I warned her about keeping Pyewacket away from here, since she seems to have taken a dislike to you.'

'Oh, I see.'

'I told her you'd been badly scratched, but I didn't say which arm, she obviously took a chance and guessed wrongly, so you see she's not much of a witch, is she?'

'No, no, I suppose she isn't.' She hesitated, cautious in case he laughed at her. 'But it would have been different if the - the doll had been there before yesterday morning, wouldn't it?'

'It would,' he agreed solemnly, 'but it wasn't.' He pulled the pin out of the clay arm and Isobel winced.

She looked down at her hands, silent for a moment, then she raised her eyes and met the black gaze as steadily as she was able. 'It's - it's rather frightening when someone hates you so much they'll resort to that,' she said, indicating the effigy with a nod of her head.

'Yes, I can imagine it must be.' He smiled at her. 'But now it's all been explained,' he said, 'and you know there's absolutely nothing to be frightened of, don't you?'

She nodded. 'Yes, thank you. I - I'm sorry I came over here and behaved like a silly child, I shouldn't have been so selfish and troubled you at this time of night.'

'Please!' He held up a protesting hand, and smiled. 'You've been no trouble. I hadn't even thought of going to bed yet, although it's time I did think.' He stood up and smiled down at her. 'But first I'll take you home and see you safely in.'

'Oh no!' Isobel protested. 'I wouldn't dream of letting you come out again tonight, I've been enough trouble and it's only a few yards. I'm quite over my heebie-jeebies now.'

'Nevertheless,' he insisted, putting a hand under her elbow, 'I shall take you home. Come along.'

She went, without further argument, partly because she thought that the garden with its shadows and whispering shrubs would be less disturbing if Lucifer was with her and partly she admitted, because she wanted him to come with her purely and simply for the pleasure of his company. The latter was something she recognized with some surprise and she wondered what Nigel would have said if he had known only a fraction of what had happened after she left him tonight.

The moon still shone, fatly yellow, in the sky, only now it had, so it seemed to Isobel, a more benevolent look, and their two shadows fell together across the gravel drive, intimately close, in silent company.

'It's a lovely night,' Lucifer said, and she nodded.

'It is really,' she allowed, 'although I didn't think so earlier on when I was coming back from the house.'

'You were nervous?'

Isobel nodded, and laughed, half ashamed to confess to such weakness. 'I - I had a strange feeling that something was going to happen,' she admitted, 'like I did last night.'

'Oh, I see.' The black eyes gleamed down at her in the moonlight. 'You already had the heebie-jeebies before you found Vanessa's little toy?'

'In a way I suppose I had,' she said. 'Although I didn't say anything to Ni—' She stopped just short of making Nigel seem unsympathetic, but she should have known that he would see through anything as simple as that.

'Nigel doesn't believe in feelings,' he guessed. 'I know, he's strictly practical, that brother of mine, and it can give the quite wrong impression that he's insensitive.'

'Oh, I know he isn't that,' Isobel hastened to assure him. 'But he laughed at my fears last night, so I decided to keep quiet tonight.'

'Wise girl.' She thought he looked a little disapproving as near as she could tell in the shifting shadows cast by the moon. 'Doesn't he feel up to bringing you home yet?' he asked. 'He could manage that far, surely.'

'I suppose he could,' Isobel agreed, 'but I wouldn't let him. It isn't necessary for such a short distance.'

His laugh sounded deep and soft and it vibrated against her where he held her close to his side. 'He doesn't use his imagination, that lad,' he

said. 'I'd have thought a moonlight walk home in a setting like this was worth it, however short the distance.'

Isobel smiled, despite the implied criticism of Nigel. 'Nigel doesn't need an imagination,' she told him. 'As you said, he's strictly a practical man.'

'And you don't mind?'

'I'm used to it.' She had answered without thinking and she heard him laugh again.

'That, if I may say so,' he informed her, 'doesn't sound very complimentary.'

'I didn't mean it to be complimentary or anything else other than a statement of fact,' she said. 'Nigel *is* a practical man and none the worse for it, I expect.'

The cottage stood before them, cosy and reassuring, and she released her arm from his hold. 'Your little grey home in the west,' he quoted. 'And no more spooky little dollies around as far as I can see.'

She realized for the first time that she had left the cottage door open when she ran out to him, and she smiled - ruefully. 'They'd have had free access if there was,' she said, and turned to face him. 'Thank you, Lucifer.'

He looked through the narrow opening into the lighted hall. 'Shall I make sure Pyewacket hasn't decided to pay you another visit?' he asked. 'As your door's been open.'

Isobel shook her head, shining gold in the light from the hall. 'She won't be here again at night, I shouldn't think,' she told him. 'Nigel says she doesn't usually go out at night.'

'That's true.' He grinned at her wickedly. 'And I must remember to stay in my own league, as I said earlier. No tricks to gain access to your maiden bower.' He pushed the door wide for her and smiled down at her, his dark face very hard to read in the shadowy moonlight, even with the yellow light from the hall shining on one side of his face. Only his eyes glowed deeply and sent a brief, tingling shiver down her spine. 'Goodnight, *piccola*, sleep tight.'

She had half expected him to kiss her, however briefly, and when he didn't even attempt to she felt a swift twinge of disappointment. 'Goodnight, Lucifer,' she said, 'and thank you again.' She tiptoed and brushed her lips lightly against his chin. 'Goodnight.'

He looked at her for a breathless second or two in silence, then his arms swept her against him, so tightly she could hear and feel the strong steady beat of his heart, and her own pulses racing wildly when his mouth closed on hers and held her for so long that she felt it would never end.

'You make it very difficult for me to remember my vows,' he whispered against her ear, while she clung to him tightly, her cheeks burning and a warm glow all over her body. 'Now be a good little girl and go into your dear little house before I forget what a baby you are.'

Isobel raised her head from his chest, her eyes huge and bright in the light, so lighthearted it seemed to affect her head and she laughed softly. '*Si, papa*,' she said demurely, and ran through the door quickly and closed it before he could voice his objections. She leaned against it for a second or two listening to the soft sound of his laughter as he walked away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lucifer, so it appeared, firmly intended keeping to his vow that he would, as he had termed it, stay in his own league. He treated Isobel with friendly politeness, but never once during the week or so that followed her panic-stricken visit to the lodge did he call her anything but a very proper Isobel, and she had to admit that she missed the various Italian endearments he had regaled her with before. Perhaps, she thought, he cared about Vanessa Law's opinion more than he cared to admit.

Nigel, now increasingly mobile, demanded more and more of her free time and she knew that sooner or later he would almost inevitably repeat his wish that she should go back with him to Frome's when he returned himself, full time.

They had walked together towards the seat at the end of the garden, overlooking the valley. With September already a day or two old, the evenings were drawing in and, even so early as this, the valley was too hazily dark to see anything other than the black bulk of the hills against the sky, although an old moon would soon lend a pallid light to the scene.

Now that he needed only one stick to help him to walk Nigel could spare an arm to encircle her shoulders, hugging her close as they came to the seat and stood for a moment under the tall elm that shaded it on sunny days.

'You're very quiet,' he told her, turning her round to face him and managing very well with his one free arm.

Isobel smiled. 'Am I? I didn't realize.'

'In fact,' he informed her, peering down at her in the dusk, 'you've been more than usually quiet for the past few days. There's nothing wrong, is there? I mean nothing to do with your job or - Luke?'

"No, of course not!"

'You're quite sure?'

'*Quite* sure,' Isobel insisted. 'I'm maybe just a little quieter than usual, that's all, Nigel.' She laughed softly, trying to see his face. 'It's the autumn coming on, it always makes me feel rather sad somehow, though I can't think why it should.'

He hugged her closer again and his lips brushed her brow gently. 'I wish I could persuade you to come back with me to London, darling. I shall miss you terribly, you know.'

'I think I shall miss you quite a lot too,' Isobel confessed, 'but I shall see you at week-ends, so it won't be too bad, will it?'

'Bad enough,' Nigel retorted, 'especially when the roads get snowed up in the winter. You know,' he added, 'I don't think you realize how bleak and inhospitable it can be here in the middle of winter.'

Isobel laughed. 'Oh, really, Nigel, anyone would think it was the North Pole instead of the west midlands! You do exaggerate so.'

'Indeed I don't,' he denied stoutly. 'Don't forget I was brought up here, I know it better than you do. It's like the Antarctic when the weather's really bad.'

'Does Lucifer go away in the winter?'

She could sense him looking at her curiously although she could no longer see him very clearly. '*No*, he doesn't. Why?'

Isobel shrugged. 'Well, I just wondered, because he was more or less brought up in Italy according to you, so if *he* can stand the Cotswold winters, so can I.'

He sighed his regret and sat down on the bench, pulling her down beside him. 'I'm fighting a losing battle, aren't I?' he asked, resignedly. 'You'll never change your mind.'

'I don't know about never,' Isobel demurred. 'I don't imagine for one minute that I shall spend the rest of my life here, but at the moment it suits me to stay, Nigel, and I shall. At least until Lucifer gives me the sack anyway,' she added, and laughed at the unlikelihood of that happening.

He sighed again, holding her hand and squeezing it hard. 'I wish I'd never even mentioned that wretched job to you, or you to Luke,' he declared. 'Things aren't working out at all as I planned they should.'

'I'm sorry, Nigel.'

'So am I,' he retorted, his arm tightening on her shoulders. 'Damn Luke, anyway, why can't he give you the sack, then you'd have to come back with me.'

'That's very unkind and very selfish,' Isobel told him.

'It's the way I feel.' He sat for a moment silent and uncommunicative, then he turned her to face him and lifted her chin. 'Isobel. Isobel, I know you've more or less made up your mind already about staying, but I *must* ask you again. Will you marry me?'

She was silent for several seconds, seeking the right words, knowing that whatever she said he would misinterpret it because he wanted only to hear one thing. 'I - I can't, Nigel.'

'Can't or won't?' Disappointment put a hard edge on his voice and the arm that held her tightened possessively. 'I Jgve you, Isobel, and you can't say that I haven't known you long enough to be certain about that. As you reminded me yourself, it's four years now, and I've

grown more and more certain in all that time. I want to marry you, and I will eventually, no matter how long you prevaricate.'

'I'm not prevaricating,' she objected. 'I just have to be certain I want to get married, and at the moment I'm sure I don't.'

He sighed, resigned again. 'All right, I accept your judgment, but I'll wait. I'll wait until you're old and grey if I have to, but nothing will ever change my mind.'

She sought to lighten the somewhat tense atmosphere he had created, and laughed softly. 'I'm very flattered,' she told him, 'but if I keep you waiting until I'm old and grey you'll probably have found someone else to marry long before then, and it will serve me right.'

'Never,' he vowed. 'I'm not Luke, I'm a one-girl man.'

Isobel smiled, wondering how Lucifer had managed yet again to get into their conversation. 'I can't believe that,' she said. 'You must have taken out other girls before me.'

'Of course I have,' he agreed. 'I've taken out quite a few at various times, but that was before I met you and before I realized how I felt about you. When I say I'm a one-girl man, I mean I've never been really serious about anyone but you.'

'Oh, I see.' She was thoughtful for a while. 'Does that mean that Lucifer *is* serious about more than one woman?' she asked, and Nigel frowned his dislike.

'How in heaven's name *do* I know when Luke's serious about his women?' he asked shortly. 'I seldom see him and we certainly never discuss anything as intimate as that. Anyway,' he added, 'we're not discussing Luke, we're talking about you and me.'

'We've already talked about you and me,' Isobel said. 'I'm staying on here, Nigel, for as long as the job lasts or until I get tired of it, depending on which happens first.'

'Well, in that case I hope you soon get fed up,' he declared, then got to his feet again, ready to walk back, his arm going round her waist.

They walked in silence for a while, then Isobel looked up at him, better able to see his face now that they were nearer the house. 'You'll probably find there've been some changes when you get back,' she told him. 'Some new attractions, maybe. After all, you've been away getting on for six months.'

'And I've been back once or twice lately,' he reminded her. 'There was nothing excitingly different that I noticed.'

'No blonde dolly-birds?' Isobel teased.

'You know I don't fall for dolly-birds,' he retorted, and Isobel laughed.

'Thank you. I *have* been referred to as one in my time, but if you say so—'

He shook his head, taking her quite seriously it seemed. 'Well, you're not,' he said firmly. 'I know you're young, but you're also clever enough to know that an excess of anything is laughable rather than attractive.'

'Thank you.'

'Oh, you know what I mean,' he insisted. 'Your minis are just mini enough and your midis are never frumpish.' He hugged her close and kissed her as they came across the lawn to the house. 'In fact,' he added, 'you're utterly and completely adorable.'

'You *are* in a flattering mood tonight,' she smiled. Usually Nigel's compliments were few and far between and always rather restrained. It seemed almost as if he was ..hoping to influence her to change her mind about going back with him, by changing his tactics.

'I'm not flattering you,' he insisted. 'I'm telling you the truth.' He stopped them just short of the long rectangle of light, that fell across the lawn from the open french windows. He turned her to face him, lifting her chin, his eyes a deep, dark blue in the diffused light. 'I shall dream about you every night,' he vowed earnestly, 'and live only for week-ends.'

'And let your business suffer,' she teased him. 'I can't have you doing that, Nigel. I tell you what I'll do, I'll give you a life-size photograph of myself and then you can gaze at it as long as you like until you get tired of looking at me.'

"Never!" He gathered her close to him in his one free arm, and his mouth on hers had an urgent, hungry appeal as he kissed her. 'I'll never get tired of looking at you,' he vowed, and held her close, his face resting on the softness of her hair. 'But I will have a picture of you, my darling,' he told her. 'A big one so that I *can* gaze at you as often as I like.' They stood like that for several minutes and only the soft, secret sounds of the autumn night broke the silence, surrounding them like a dark shawl. 'Darling.' 'Hmm?'

'There's something I'd *rather* have. Better than a photograph.'

Isobel raised her head and looked up at him curiously. 'What's that?'

He brushed his lips against her forehead and she thought there was a curious, slightly malicious smile touching his mouth. 'The drawing that Gal Ford did of you.'

'But I haven't got it, Nigel, you know that.'

She wished she was more sure, suddenly, of the fate of the sketch that Lucifer had had done of her and she wondered too if Nigel had asked for it with any ulterior motive in mind. 'I know you haven't got it,' he agreed, 'but you could get it for me.'

'From Lucifer?'

'You said he'd kept it,' he pointed out. 'I expect he's still got it.'

Isobel traced a line down from his collar to the top button on his jacket, her eyes following its progress. 'Then why can't you ask him for it?' she said.

'Because I think you'd stand more chance of succeeding than I would,' he told her bluntly. 'He'd never part with it if he thought I wanted it.'

'Oh, I'm sure he would,' Isobel argued, ignoring his frown at her defence of Lucifer. 'He's not petty like that, Nigel. If you really want the drawing, I'm sure he'd let you have it.'

'You won't ask him for me?'

She shook her head. 'I'd rather not.'

'O.K.' He kissed her again before drawing her along with him again. 'I'll ask him myself, but he won't let me have it, you see. I know my big brother much better than you do, my darling, and he won't let me have it.'

Nigel's opportunity to ask for the drawing he wanted so much, came on the following Sunday when Lucifer was lunching at the house again. He waited until they were at the coffee stage and then broached the subject, rather abruptly, since he hated asking Lucifer for

anything, and his brother looked at him in silence for a moment or two, his black eyes curious.

'I don't quite see why *you* want a drawing,' he told him. 'You've got the original, haven't you?'

'Only at week-ends after next week,' Nigel told him shortly. 'I'd like the drawing to hang in my flat. I'll pay you what you paid Cal Ford for it,' he added hastily, as if the financial aspect of it was the reason for Lucifer's hesitation.

'If you had it at all,' Lucifer told him quietly, 'I wouldn't dream of taking anything for it.'

Nigel pounced on the betraying 'if', his brows already drawn into a frown, ready to argue. '*If* I had it,' he said. 'I suppose that means you're refusing to part with it?'

Isobel, watching Lucifer's dark, expressive face, thought his mouth tightened fractionally, but he smiled a moment later and shrugged in that rather foreign way that Nigel despised so much. 'It was a roll of paper I slung into the back of the car on the day of the show,' he told his brother. 'Heaven alone knows where it is now.'

Isobel felt a strangely hurt feeling at his casual dismissal of it, while Nigel positively glowered at him. 'Do you mean to say you've lost it?' he accused, and Lucifer shrugged again.

'Something like that, old sport. Sorry and all that.'

'You careless devil!' Nigel hated losing anything he had set his heart on.

Isobel watched Lucifer still, puzzled by something in his manner. 'You know me,' he shrugged.

'Isobel says it was a good one too,' Nigel complained, and Lucifer nodded, his black eyes lowered in uncharacteristic reticence while his long fingers played with the spoon in his saucer. 'It was a good one,' he agreed quietly.

'And you had to go and lose it.'

Lucifer looked up then, a small, shadowy frown between his black brows for Nigel's pettiness. 'You're making an awful fuss about a bit of paper with a sketch on,' he told him shortly. 'Instead you should be thanking your stars it isn't the original you've lost. Your trouble is, Nigel, you never know when you're well off.'

Nigel looked at him in surprise for a moment, then he too shrugged resignedly. 'I suppose I am lucky,' he allowed. 'I shall be able to come and see Isobel every weekend ; but I had set my heart on having that drawing.'

Lucifer smiled wryly. 'Losing something you've set your heart on is supposed to be good for your immortal soul,' he said softly, and Isobel could not quite understand why he looked at her when he said it.

Mrs. Grayson had said nothing during the exchange between them, now she refilled Lucifer's coffee cup and smiled at him in a way that confirmed something at the back of Isobel's mind. There was something going on between Lucifer and his grandmother that they were not going to mention, and it was surprising to her that Nigel did not notice it too. Obviously he had not done so so far or he would have said something about it. Perhaps, she thought in a flash of inspiration, Lucifer had destroyed the drawing and Mrs. Grayson knew it, but they would not let Nigel know.

'As Lucifer says, dear,' Mrs. Grayson told Nigel, 'you still have Isobel, and she's far prettier than any drawing, I'm sure.'

'Of course she is.' Nigel leaned across and squeezed Isobel's hand. 'If only I could persuade her to come back with me and marry me!'

His grandmother smiled tolerantly. "Never try to rush a girl into marriage, Nigel," she told him. 'It can lead to so many regrets later on, and Isobel's very young.'

'Isobel's twenty-two,' Nigel told her bluntly. 'Almost the same age as Madge was when she married my father.'

"Your mother already had a divorce behind her then," the old lady sighed, 'and a little boy to worry about. Let Isobel enjoy her freedom while she can, dear, she'll know her own mind one of these days.' She smiled at Isobel, her blue eyes strangely appealing. 'Won't you, Isobel dear?'

'I'll know,' Isobel agreed, hoping she would when the time came. 'And I'm in no hurry to settle down yet.'

On the following Monday morning Lucifer had said he must go into Greenlaw to see someone urgently, but he made no offer this time to take her with him, and she stayed at her typewriter, feeling rather cross and disappointed.

It was during the morning that she saw her empty coffee cup still standing on her desk and decided to take it back herself. Usually Beppo, Lucifer's man, had collected the coffee cups by now, but she supposed this morning he had simply forgotten it.

Nothing loath to take a break from her typing, she left the office and found the cottage oddly silent, as if there was no one else there but herself, and she stood for a moment outside the kitchen door. 'Hello!' she called. 'Is anyone here?' It was possible, she supposed, that Lucifer had taken Beppo with him to do some shopping or something,

but a moment later the kitchen door opened and the man's dark, soulful-looking eyes looked at her curiously.

'Si, signorina?'

'Oh! There you are.' She offered him the empty cup with a smile. 'You forgot to collect the empties,' she told him, and then realized suddenly that she had no idea at all if he spoke any English. She had only ever heard Lucifer speak to him in Italian.

Whether he understood or not he smiled understanding and bobbed his black head in thanks. *'Grazie, signorina, grazie.'* He bobbed quickly back into the kitchen and left Isobel with the crazy desire to laugh because he reminded her of the little man in a weather-house, the way he had popped in and out so quickly.

She turned and started back through the small hall, past the room where Lucifer had brought her on the night she had been so panic-stricken about that horrible effigy of herself. There was another door too, on the other side of the hallway, a bedroom, judging by what she could see through, the narrow opening where it stood ajar. She would have walked on and into the office again, but something caught her eye and stopped her dead in her tracks, her eyes wide and unbelieving. It was such a big bedroom that it must be Lucifer's and facing her, right opposite the door, was the drawing he had denied knowing the fate of.

A wary finger pushed the door just a fraction wider and she stared at the framed drawing. The sharp black charcoal lines stood out on the white background, her own features clear and unmistakable and she found herself smiling, a small secret smile that acknowledged the fact that Nigel must never ever know about this.

She dared not linger too long for fear the manservant came out of the kitchen suddenly and caught her there, so she pulled the door to as it

was before and almost tiptoed back to the office and her neglected typewriter.

The following morning, Isobel frankly admitted that she would have given much to have relations as they had been before Lucifer's self-imposed formality. She would have liked to tease him about the drawing, although he would probably not take kindly to her wandering about his home while he was away. Anyway, she shrugged, he was far too formal and polite these days to allow her to indulge in anything like their former lighthearted banter.

She found him already in the office when she came in, slightly early, his black head bent busily over a pile of work, and he did not even look up when she came in.

'Good morning.' She was determined not to be ignored.

His head lifted briefly, and the black eyes smiled a friendly greeting. 'Good morning, Isobel.'

Still a very formal Isobel, she noted wryly, and only briefly polite. She put her coat on its hanger and put bag and gloves tidily in a drawer before uncovering her typewriter.

'Are we going to be busy today?' she asked, and he again glanced up.

'Not too bad, I hope,' he told her. 'As you can see, I've made an early start.'

'I did notice,' she remarked, unable to resist the jibe. 'It's most unusual, isn't it?'

For a moment the familiar imp of devilment glittered at her from across the room, and he half-smiled. 'I'll treat that with the contempt it

deserves,' he told her. 'Now will you please get on with your own work and leave me to get on with mine?'

'Of course. I'm sorry.'

There was verbal silence for a moment or two while Isobel banged away on her typewriter, then he looked up suddenly, sighed, and put down his pen. 'O.K.,' he said, 'I'm sorry I squashed you, now will you stop trying to wreck that poor innocent machinery?'

'I didn't know I was. The typewriter's never bothered you before.'

The black eyes regarded her for a second or two, then he laughed, the first time he had done anything so informal for far too long, and she looked at him hopefully. 'The typewriter doesn't bother me now,' he told her, 'it's your treatment of it that I'm complaining about. I can feel you being self-righteous even from here.'

'I was *not* being self-righteous,' she denied. 'I just don't like having my nose bitten off for no good reason, that's all.'

'It's a very nice little nose.' His voice was soft and low and her spine tingled warningly at the sound of it.

She did not look at him but down at the paper guide which she flicked up and down with one finger, very tempted again to mention the drawing she had inadvertently discovered. 'Lucifer.'

'Hmm?' He was still watching her, she knew, although she refused to look at him.

'That drawing - the one Cal Ford did of me at the show.'

'What about it?'

Her hesitation was only brief. 'Have you really lost it?'

His chin rested on one hand, the elbow propped on his desk, black eyes regarding her steadily. 'Are you calling me a liar?' he asked softly, and she shook her head hastily, wishing now she had not mentioned it. He was far too astute and far too good at reading her mind, and it was just possible he would tumble to the fact that she'd seen the drawing. Then she would be required to explain *how* she came to see it.

'Of course I'm not calling you a liar,' she denied. 'It's just that Nigel was so sure you wouldn't let him have it and you seemed—' She raised her eyes at last and looked at him briefly. 'Evasive,' she decided at last, and saw him frown.

He looked down at the work in front of him again, a closed look on his face that was strange to her, and which she recognized meant he was not going to say any more on the subject.

'It seems rather a lot of fuss to make about a small sketch that's only worth a few shillings,' he said quietly. 'Now can we *please* get on with some work?'

'Yes, of course. I'm sorry.' She felt it rather an anticlimax and she rolled another piece of paper into her machine with fingers that shook rather. 'Actually,' she said as off-handedly as she knew how, 'I've been wondering if I should take Nigel's advice and do as he wants me to. Go back to London with him,' she added to make sure there was no mistake, and felt a small flutter of satisfaction at the momentary stunned look she saw on his face.

He was silent for quite a long time, his whole attention apparently concentrated on the pen he was twirling between his fingers. 'It might be a good idea,' he told her at last, and Isobel stared at him.

'I - I beg your pardon?'

His attention was still with the twirling pen and he did not raise his eyes. 'I was agreeing with you,' he said quietly.

'You - you mean you're telling me to go? You're dismissing me?'

She could scarcely believe she had understood him aright, but when he looked up at last he was nodding. 'Not in so many words,' he said, 'but I'll take your notice to leave as from today if you like, and then you can leave when Nigel goes next week.'

Isobel had never in all her life felt so utterly stunned and lifeless. Even her fingers were suddenly stiff as she flicked the paper guide automatically, her eyes blank and darkly grey with that hot, prickly feeling at the back of- them as if she would cry at any moment.

'I - I'm sorry if I haven't been very efficient,' she managed at last, in a voice that sounded horribly choked. 'I thought you were quite satisfied with my work.'

'Oh, I am,' he assured her. 'If you needed a reference I'd give you an excellent one without any hesitation.'

'Then why—' she began, and a moment later bit her lip as the answer became only too clear to her. Of course, she should have known that Vanessa Law would probably issue an ultimatum which he could no longer ignore if he wanted to continue their association. 'It doesn't matter, of course,' she told him. 'I think I understand.'

For a moment the black eyes held hers steadily and her blood raced through her veins, making her head throb, then he shook his head and hid his gaze again. 'I doubt if you do,' he said softly.

'I - I leave a week today?' It was staggering how suddenly cold and empty she felt.

'You can leave on Friday,' he said, 'then you can go back with Nigel on Sunday.'

'Thank you.'

It sounded oddly stiff and formal and he glanced up curiously. 'What for?'

'For - for not making me work out a month's notice.'

He laughed shortly. 'I'm not *giving* you a month's notice either,' he reminded her dryly.

'Will - will you be able to get someone else so quickly? To finish the last chapters,' she added hastily, and he shrugged, still not looking at her. 'Oh, we'll get those done by the end of this week,' he said, and the familiar 'we' almost shattered her self-control.

'Yes - yes, of course.'

She stared at the blank page in her machine, and gave herself a mental shake. It was no use letting the suddenness of it make her miserable, and at least Nigel would be pleased. She would, she thought, probably marry him quite soon and settle down, for all of a sudden she saw the prospect of life as a secretary far less attractive. Office routine and business letters would never have the same appeal again after typing Lucifer's manuscripts.

'After that,' he said unexpectedly, 'I'm off to Italy for a couple of months for a break.'

'Oh! Oh, I see. I didn't realize that.' Somehow it helped a bit to know that he would be away for quite a while after she left and that her dismissal had another reason than Vanessa Law's jealousy behind it.

'I haven't seen my father for quite some time now,' he told her, 'and I rather miss Italy when I stay away too long.'

She hoped she sounded only casually interested, and that her voice didn't shake too much. 'I expect you do,' she said. 'It's very beautiful, isn't it?'

The black eyes sought hers, but she refused to meet them. 'Beautiful,' he said softly. 'You've never been?'

'No.'

'You should, you'd love it.'

Her laugh, she knew, sounded breathless and rather forced as she pushed the carriage along ready to start work again. 'Maybe we'll spend our honeymoon there,' she told him, and almost felt the silence that followed.

'Maybe,' he said at last, and she thought there was sadness in the way he said it, so that she raised her eyes swiftly to look at him, and as hastily lowered them again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nigel stared at her blankly for a moment when Isobel told him about her sudden change of plan. 'He must be out of his mind,' he said. His reaction was not at all what she expected, in fact he seemed rather more outraged than pleased that she was coming with him after all.

'But isn't this what you wanted?' she said. 'It was only the other day that you were urging me to come with you.'

'I was also urging you to marry me,' Nigel retorted, 'but quite frankly I didn't expect either thing to happen.' He eyed her for a few moments speculatively. 'I suppose it's too much to hope that *that* could materialize out of the blue as well, isn't it?' he asked hopefully.

Isobel smiled slowly. 'I'm afraid it is,' she said. 'I have rather a lot on my mind at the moment.' She sat thoughtfully quiet for a while, then looked up at him curiously. 'Did you know that Lucifer's going to Italy?' she asked.

'Is he? It's the first I've heard of it,' he said. 'Gran doesn't know either, I'm sure, or she'd have said something.'

'He says he needs the break.'

'Oh, nonsense,' Nigel snorted. 'He's as tough as old boots, he never needs a break, and I doubt very much if Papa Bennetti will extend much of a welcome in the circs.'

Isobel pursed her lips. 'You mean the young wife?' she asked, and Nigel nodded, a malicious smile on his face.

'The beautiful young Contessa,' he said. 'She's too young b^ all accounts for it to be safe to have Luke around in the place.'

'Is she so much younger than her husband?'

Nigel laughed. 'She's only about thirty, according to Gran, and that's several years younger than Luke, let alone his father.'

'I see.' She thought about it for a while. 'He - he seems to be a man who likes younger women, doesn't he? Didn't you say your mother was only young when she married him?'

'She was seventeen and he was thirty,' Nigel said, his opinion of the match evident in his voice. 'No wonder it didn't last.'

'Oh, I don't think that's a likely reason for a marriage breaking up,' Isobel argued, without thinking of the consequences for the moment. 'Quite a few well-known people have married women much younger than themselves and it seems to work perfectly well.'

Nigel eyed her dubiously, obviously not liking her opinion. 'I'll take your word for it,' he told her shortly. 'I've never studied the statistics.'

Time had never passed so quickly as the last week at Kanderby Lodge did, and Isobel found it more and more difficult each day to adjust to the idea of leaving not only her job with Lucifer, but also her little cottage in the garden. Even the weather seemed to have turned sympathetically gloomy and huge, dark clouds sat ominously on the hills, threatening rain or worse.

Lucifer remained quietly polite, even aloof by comparison with his former manner and Isobel told herself she should be glad to be leaving tomorrow. Only Nigel seemed really pleased that she was leaving, although he was still a bit annoyed that Lucifer had had the temerity to dismiss her so abruptly.

On her last evening, she thought, Lucifer might perhaps be a little regretful because she was going, he might even offer to take her to

dinner as a sort of farewell present, but she was rather shattered to discover that he was leaving early to go out for the evening.

She was still busy typing the last pages of the manuscript and he paused by her desk on his way out. 'I don't suppose I shall see you again,' he told her, his black eyes almost hidden under lowered lids as he towered above her. 'Unless,' he added with a wry smile, 'I meet you one of these days as my sister-in-law.'

Isobel swallowed hard on the lump that rose in her throat and threatened to choke her words, or at least make her voice horribly husky and trembly. 'It's — it's possible,' she said. 'Nigel's very persistent.'

'He's a good man, Isobel.'

'I know.' At one time, she thought, she would have been surprised at both the words and the seriousness with which he said them, now she merely accepted that he knew his brother possibly better than anyone did, and was far more fond of him than he would have anyone believe.

He proffered a hand and she put her own into it after only a brief hesitation. '*Addio, bella mia,*' he said softly, and raised her fingers to his lips. '*Piccola.*'

'Lucifer—' She looked up, but he was gone, and for several minutes she sat quite still all alone in the big room, her vision blurred by the big, warm tears that trembled on her lashes and rolled slowly down her cheeks.

Isobel went to her cottage quite early that night, she had little heart for the company of anyone and, as she told Nigel, she had to pack ready for leaving on Sunday. In reality she wanted to be alone, to think and

to sort out the thoughts that tumbled chaotically over each other until her head spun with them.

The air was sultry, heavy with a threatened storm, and it was pitch dark once she had walked along the gravel path and the light from the house porch was hidden by the shrubbery, but she scarcely noticed. She knew her way along that piece of drive blindfold and needed no lights.

A faint distant rumble distracted her briefly and she pulled a wry face, shivering at the prospect of a storm before night was through. A thunderstorm was all she needed right now, she thought ruefully, and immediately remembered the last time there had been a thunderstorm.

It seemed incredible that it was barely a month ago that she had crouched like a coward on the settee in the tiny sitting-room, hiding her head from the storm, but drawn to the door by the plaintive mewling of Vanessa Law's cat. Not only the cat had found its way into the cottage that night, but Lucifer as well, and she shook her head impatiently as she hurried down the last few feet of path to her cottage. Lucifer was a thing of the past and it was no use getting maudlin about things that were best forgotten.

She finished her packing in a very short time, and wandered back into the sitting-room and sat down, shivering in a sudden chill as a distant rumble growled over the hills in warning.

It would not be easy to settle down again to rooms in London after having had her own cottage, nor would the air smell as sweet through the open windows. She got up 'again, made restless by the storm as well as her own uneasy spirit. She opened the window wider and admitted the first heavy drops of rain that plopped on to her hand that held the catch, cool and big as shillings, rattling like small pebbles on the leaves of the shrubs.

Beyond the trees and bushes she glimpsed the first sear-ing flash of lightning in the distant sky and felt the inevitable grip of fear in the pit of her stomach. *It* was still early enough for her to go back across to the house if she chose to, and sit in company with Nigel and Mrs. Grayson until the storm was over, but somehow she still preferred to be alone.

She made coffee and found a magazine to read, and by the time she was on her second cup the storm was much closer and Nigel had still not come across to her. It had been rather a vain hope that he would, and she was even unsure if she wanted him to come, but it would have been a welcome gesture of understanding.

By just after eleven o'clock the little cottage was shaking with the fury of the storm and by some miracle she had managed not to hide her head in the cushions. She felt her knees trembling as she got to her feet, and gasped aloud when the streaming windows were suddenly brilliantly lit by a vivid slash of light that crackled and cracked, and for a brief second illuminated the path outside and the shining wet shrubs.

Tense and holding her breath for fear, she waited for the roll of thunder to follow, but not only for that. In that split second of illumination she had seen something move against the shining wet background of leaves, some dark shape that vanished when darkness fell again.

The shuddering roar of thunder and some other sound, barely heard above the racket, sounded almost as one as she swiftly put her hands to her ears, then lowered them slowly when the thunder died and left the other, sharper sound still rat-tatting impatiently on her door.

For a moment her legs refused to carry her even that short distance, and then suddenly, some heart-stopping skip of elation ran through her body and she found herself running to the door. The catch at first

behaved clumsily in her fingers and she wrestled with it impatiently, then at last it opened and she flung the door wide to admit the man on the step.

His black hair flopped wetly over his forehead and his jacket was soaked across the shoulders, the dark face glistening in the light of the hall. Isobel closed the door carefully after him and followed him into the sitting- room, her heart hammering unbearably against her ribs and the blood singing through her veins until her whole body glowed with it.

He turned when he reached the fireplace, and looked at her. 'I couldn't leave you alone in this,' he said, and Isobel felt the tears blind her for a second before they rolled warmly down her cheeks.

'I - I'm glad you came.' It sounded so ridiculously formal saying it like that, but he knew how much she meant it and his arms reached out for her, pulling her close against the dampness of his coat.

His lips brushed gently against her forehead and he laughed softly above her head. 'Did you use your powers of witchcraft to lure me here?' he asked.

'Yes.' She snuggled closer to him as an angry roar shook the cottage. 'I called up the storm devils and told them to bring you to me.'

He held her away from him, his black eyes glowing like coals in the yellow light, and Isobel felt the pulse in her temple racing wildly as she looked up at him. 'I have no right here, *carissima*.' He was suddenly very serious, and she feared he might have second thoughts and leave again, so that she clung to him tightly, her huge eyes wide and anxious. 'I have no right here at all. If Nigel had been here I'd have turned back and never seen you again, but he wasn't.'

She shook her head. 'He didn't come,' she said. 'I thought he might, now that he knows I don't like storms, but he didn't come.'

He looked at her for a while in silence, then a hand gently touched her face, and she leaned her cheek against it. 'You're very beautiful,' he said softly, 'and very, very young.'

Isobel shook her head, her eyes shining darkly grey, quite sure of her own feelings now. 'I'm old enough to know my own mind,' she told him, and he smiled.

'Are you, *carissima*?''

'Quite old enough,' she insisted firmly, and he pulled her close again and kissed her mouth lightly. 'I've been quite sure how I felt ever since I—' She stopped short and he cocked a curious brow at her.

'When?' he asked quietly. 'Ever since you saw that drawing of yourself in my bedroom?' He laughed when she stared at him wide-eyed.

'How on earth did you know about that?' she asked.

'Easy.' His eyes teased her gently. 'Firstly Beppo saw you walking away from the open door, and secondly I knew you'd been up to something when you asked me so pointedly about having lost the drawing.'

'Oh, you—' She pouted her mouth at him reproachfully.

He was sober again suddenly, looking at her in a way that made her heart do crazy things. 'It was the hardest thing I ever did in my life saying good-bye to you,' he told her. 'But I should have kept to my vow and gone away without seeing you again. It would have been easier.'

She stared up at him. 'You - you're not going now?'

He sighed. 'I should, *bell a mia*. I'm not a very desirable character, you know.'

'You are to me!' She held on to him tightly. 'I don't care how many - how many girl-friends you've had in the past.' It sounded rather childishly prissy put like that and she was not at all surprised when he smiled in something of the old, familiar way, mocking her reticence.

'Oh, you do make it sound so very polite, my darling,' he told her, and she looked at him reproachfully.

'Lucifer, will you stop treating me like a child?' she said firmly. 'I'm not a child, you know.'

He said nothing, but pulled her so close to him that she could feel his heartbeat as plainly as her own, and his mouth was warm and strong, and as gentle as she remembered it from what seemed like a lifetime ago. Then he put her from him, shaking his head slowly. 'Oh, Isobel, *bella mia*, you can so easily make me forget what I should do.' His hands caressed her cheeks softly, the black eyes unbelievably gentle as he looked down at her. 'I swore I wouldn't let this happen, and now—' He shrugged lightly. 'I told myself there were so many reasons why I had no right to love you, and that I'm old enough not to reform easily.'

'Do you *want* to reform?' she asked softly, and he nodded.

'I think I do, *car a mia*. For you I'd try very hard.'

Isobel lifted her face and kissed the firm strong mouth gently. 'Don't change too much, darling Lucifer,' she said.

She understood nothing of the soft, lyrical words that were whispered softly against her ear, but their meaning was plain enough and she raised her head at last to smile up at him. 'You must teach me Italian,' she told him, 'then I can understand all those beautiful words you say.'

'Of course I shall teach you.' He kissed her mouth, and her throat, closing her eyes with the gentle pressure of his lips before he held her against him tightly. 'It would never do if the Contessa Bennetti couldn't speak at least some of her husband's language, would it?'

'Contessa?' She looked up again hastily. 'Oh, yes, of course I'd forgotten about you being your father's only son.' She considered the idea for a moment, uncertain suddenly of her own capabilities as a countess. 'Oh, Lucifer, suppose—'

'Suppose you say you'll marry me?' he said, kissing the tip of her nose. 'I love you, God help me, but I shall probably hate myself in the morning for being so selfish as to ask you to marry me, so please say you will before you have second thoughts too. *Will* you marry me, *piccola*?'

'Of course I will,' Isobel told him calmly. 'I love you.'

He looked down at her, at the huge, shiny grey eyes and the slightly dishevelled golden head that barely reached his chest. 'You're a witch,' he informed her solemnly. 'A pretty little grey-eyed witch, and you brew such powerful magic that I never really had a chance.' Strong gentle fingers lifted her face to him and as he kissed her again, neither of them noticed that the storm had passed them by overhead.