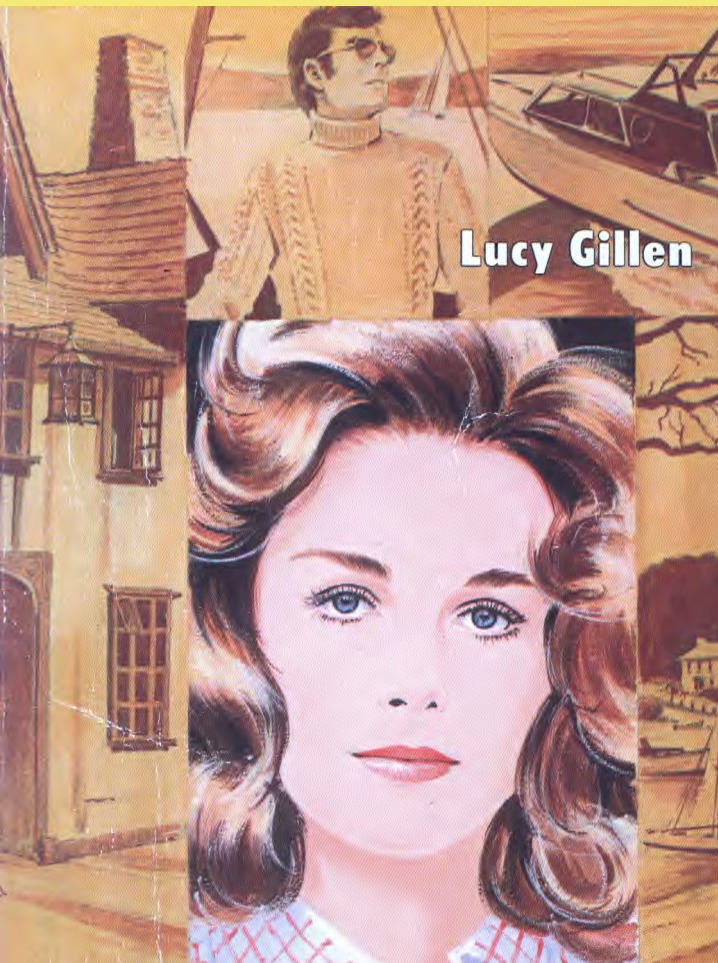


1604

THAT MAN NEXT DOOR

Lucy Gillen



THAT MAN NEXT DOOR

by LUCY GILLEN

Kim was looking forward to living in a delightful seaside village and working with a celebrated and as it turned out — handsome and charming author, George Daley.

But that was before she met someone very different indeed: her maddening next-door neighbour, James Fleming!



4

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CHAPTER I

UNCLE JOHN had promised to meet her off the train when she arrived, but Kim could see no sign of him as she stood on the one small platform that comprised Woodsea station, and she sighed resignedly. Uncle John had always been notoriously absent-minded, and since his retirement last year he had probably got worse rather than better.

As a matter of fact there seemed to be no one else about at all, either arriving or departing, although she had caught a fleeting glimpse of some shadowy shapes disappearing into the gloom of the ticket hall as she stepped off the train.

She had been obliged to lift her cases down rather hastily from the luggage rack, when she suddenly realised she had reached her destination, and a solitary porter and shaken his head over her hurried exit but made no practicable offer to help.

She handed over her ticket and left the station building carrying her two suitcases and still looking round hopefully for a sign that her uncle had remembered she was coming.

There were a couple of ancient-looking taxis standing on the far side of the yard outside, their drivers looking across at her speculatively as she hesitated, wondering if it would be best to take one of the taxis or to ring her uncle and let him know she had arrived.

As she stood, hesitant, on the edge of the kerb she suddenly caught sight of her uncle's rather battered old car just turning into the yard, and raised a hand in greeting to him, stepping off the kerb as she did so and unaware that there was anyone else in the vicinity.

A second later she jumped back hastily, her eyes wide

and startled, as a piercing blast on a horn jarred her into realisation.

It had been raining earlier in the day and, although the hot sun was rapidly drying the tar-macadamed surface, there were still some quite deep puddles in the pitted surface of the yard. A car swept past her, swerving to avoid her, and sending a spray of muddy water all over her as **it** ran through a puddle and then on across the yard to the exit, without even pausing.

"Oh no!" Kim put down her suitcases and gazed down in horror at her pale blue coat, now liberally streaked with black mud. She brushed at it with ineffectual hands for *a* moment before realising that she was spoiling her light gloves as well in the process.

She looked up, angry eyes following the car's progress, in time to see it swing out of the yard and to notice several small faces pressed against the rear window, all of them laughing delightedly at her predicament.

Her uncle drove up, stopped the car and hastily came round to her, his round face as apologetic as if he had been the one to splash her. "Kim, my dear ! " He looked at her ruined coat and gloves with the helpless air that was typical of him. "What can we do?"

"Nothing at the moment," Kim told him, glowering after the offender, "but if ever I see that — that maniac again I'll know what to do ! "

John Keeler picked up her suitcases, smiling uncertainly. "**I** was going to say welcome to Woodsea," he told her, "but in the circumstances it seems a little out of place."

"**I** *am* glad to be here, despite everything," Kim assured him, tip-toeing to kiss his anxious face. "Thank you, Uncle John, it was sweet of you to meet me and it wasn't your fault **I** fell foul of the local madman. Those little monsters in the back of the car, too, did you see them laughing?"

"Yes, I did," her uncle admitted, looking vaguely uneasy. "Actually it was the children I recognised."

He put her cases into the back of the car, then saw her into the front passenger seat, still looking worried about something. "You mean you know them?" Kim asked, and he nodded.

"I'm pretty sure it was the Fleming children, though I couldn't swear to it, I only had a glimpse of them. It was Fleming's car too, I'm pretty certain."

"Whoever they are," Kim retorted, "I hope I never see them again. Once is enough!"

"That might be difficult," John Keeler demurred, almost apologetic. "I mean it might be difficult to avoid seeing them at some time or other — you see they live next door to us."

"Oh, heavens!" Kim digested the information for a moment, then shrugged resignedly. "Oh well, I can always keep out of their way, I suppose. I shall be away from the house most of the day anyway."

Her uncle seemed to brighten at the change of subject. "You've got the job with George Daley?" he asked, and Kim pulled a wry face.

"Not for certain, Uncle John, but I think I may have. I have to see Mr. Daley tomorrow morning and confirm it. At least I hope it's only a formality; I've been rather rash about this, I'm afraid, it still remains to be seen whether I've been *too* impulsive."

They had turned out of the yard and on to a narrow road with some houses along one side of it and a few shops along the other. It looked a sleepy, contented little place, Kim thought, and very different from London.

They were just picking up speed along the road when they saw a car stopped only a few yards in front of them, and Kim automatically tightened her mouth as she recog-

nised the one that had splashed her coat. The driver was half-turned in his seat and looked as if he was about to reverse, indeed he had actually started to move backwards when he saw John Keeler's car coming up behind him and stopped again.

Her uncle overtook him, and, as they drove past, Kim made no secret of the glare she directed at the driver. She had a fleeting impression of a rather untidy light brown head and a pair of extraordinarily light eyes that followed their progress as if the man was uncertain what to do next.

"That," Kim told her uncle, "was the maniac who nearly ran me down at the station."

"And it's who I thought it was," her uncle informed her. "His name's Fleming, he's our next-door neighbour. Not that I know the man to speak to, but I've seen him going in and out."

Kim made no further comment, but vowed silent vengeance on the dangerous Mr. Fleming, whoever he might prove to be. The blue coat had cost her quite a lot of money and she knew it would never be quite the same again once it had been cleaned.

She looked out at the small community they were driving through, wondering how she would settle down to life in a place that was to all intents little more than a village. No doubt it would take quite a bit of getting used to after having spent most of her life very near to London, but she had never been much of a bright-lights girl and from what she could see of it, Woodsea looked quietly attractive.

It consisted of little more than two or three streets, she thought as they drove through, but most of the houses were large and quite prosperous-looking. It looked like a place to retire to, as her uncle and aunt had done, quiet and unambitious about drawing the holiday trade. Content to stay as it was and let progress pass it by.

She began wondering again what her prospective employer would be like and, not for the first time, had a qualm of doubt about the impulse that had made her apply for the job of secretary to George Daley. It was partly, she supposed, because the idea of working for a crime-writer intrigued her, and the fact that she knew Aunt Bess and Uncle John would be only too pleased to have her live with them. The coincidence of the two facts had decided her and she had left her secure and quite lucrative post in town to come to Woodsea.

The big old house that Aunt Bess and Uncle John had bought for their retirement had since proved to be far too big for just two people, so she had no worries about accommodation once the job was hers. Not that she must count her chickens yet, for she had still to see George Daley and be approved and there was no telling whether or not he would consider her suitable.

Kim visualised him a dark, serious and rather gloomy man, her opinion freely influenced by the tone of his books, and she hoped she would be able to cope with such a man as she imagined him to be without being too scared of him to do her work properly. Anyway — she sighed, putting George Daley to the back of her mind for the moment.

She glimpsed the sea occasionally between houses and trees off to her right, and it glittered in the hot August sun invitingly, dismissing all thought of dark and gloomy employers. She relaxed a little, smiling fondly at her uncle.

"I think I shall like being here," she told him with certainty. "It looks so gloriously peaceful after London."

"I only hope you won't find it too quiet," her uncle demurred. "It's a nice little place, but there's not much for young people to do, I'm afraid. Anyway, if you get too tired of the quiet life you can always go into Woodmouth

and find the bright lights. Your aunt and I love it here, though."

"I shall too," Kim assured him, "it looks lovely."

She sat back, smiling in anticipation, as they drove out on to the road that ran along the top of a sea wall and curved with the sweep of the tiny bay. It was, appropriately enough, called Sea Wall. The sturdy grey stone ran the whole width of the bay with a short drop on to yellow sand below. It was only a short, narrow beach, but it looked deserted and very inviting and Kim's smile already anticipated basking in the sun and leisurely swims in the ocean, with her duties as secretary only vaguely somewhere in the background.

Her uncle turned his head briefly, as if he followed her thoughts, smiling as he thought again how lovely she had grown. She had the same perfect pink and white complexion that her aunt, his wife, had, but she had inherited her mother's thick fair hair and blue eyes, a combination that was enchanting, if not quite beautiful. It puzzled him a little, when he gave it any thought, why, at nearly twenty-four, she was still unmarried, but Kim had always been an independent little thing and no doubt she would settle down one day.

He brought the car to a halt before a tall, mellow-looking house of grey stone, its windows bright with flowered curtains that Aunt Bess would have been unable to resist, Kim thought, and gave an involuntary smile when she saw them.

"Summer House," she read from an engraved board beside the gate, "it's exactly right, Uncle John, isn't it?"

Her uncle smiled a little sheepishly. "It's a sentimental gesture in a way," he confessed, lifting her luggage from the back of the car. "I proposed to your aunt in the summer house at Frayle, you know."

"Did you? I didn't know that." Frayle was Kim's grandfather's house in Surrey, and she could appreciate the sentiment and romance behind the naming of their home. Practical as she usually was, Kim also had a strong romantic streak. "I think it's a lovely gesture," she told her uncle softly.

Aunt Bess was waiting in the doorway before they had walked the few feet of pathway from the gate, her round face, uncannily like Kim's father's, beaming a welcome, her brown eyes misty as she gathered Kim into a big hug that took no account of mud-splashes or creases.

"Kim dear ! Oh, it's lovely to see you again." She held her at arm's length for a moment while she studied her. "You *are* a lovely child."

"I'm not a child any more, Aunt Bess," Kim reminded her with a laugh. "I've had the key of the door for several years now."

"Well, no matter, you're still a child to me," Aunt Bess averred, "and very like your mother. I always envied her so, I quite frankly admit it." She laughed at her own admission and hugged Kim again impulsively. "Tell me, how's that young brother of mine keeping?"

"Oh, he's fine," Kim told her, laughing at the allusion to her father's youth. Bess was his eldest sister, nearly eleven years older and never tired of reminding him of it.

"And your mother?"

"Mother too," Kim smiled. "They both sent their love."

"Good. Now, let me have your coat, dear, and we'll see about some tea. I'm sure you'll be glad of some after all that travelling."

"I'd love some," Kim agreed, "although it's not all that far, you know, Aunt Bess."

"Far enough," Aunt Bess decreed, "to need tea at the end of it, I'm sure."

Kim laughed, unfastening her mud-splattered coat, reminded again of the incident at the station. "I'm sorry to arrive looking like a tramp," she apologised, "but you can blame one of your neighbours for the state I'm in."

"Oh?" Her aunt looked intrigued, taking the stained coat from her. "What happened, dear? It's such a pretty coat too. What a shame!"

"It's new," Kim told her, pulling a face over the damage. "Some idiot drove straight through a puddle and sent muddy water all over me. Uncle John said his name was — Fleming or something like that."

Her aunt nodded. "James Fleming, he lives next door at Covely. I only know his name's James," she went on to explain when she saw her husband's raised brows, "because I've heard the children call him that, otherwise I know nothing about the man; he's a bit of a dark horse, I think. He certainly doesn't mix with anyone I know." She frowned her dislike of that situation as she led the way into a chintz and polished sitting-room, bright with sunshine and gleaming copper. Aunt Bess was very sweet, but she loved to know all about people and was inclined to view with suspicion anyone she could not immediately categorise. "Sit down, Kim dear, and I'll make some tea."

Several cups of tea and a welter of family talk later, the time had passed so quickly that Kim, glancing at her watch, was surprised to see how late it was. "Good heavens, just look at the time!" she laughed. "I'd no idea it had gone so quickly. I'd rather like to go for a walk and look at the sea before dinner, Aunt Bess. Would you mind if I took a stroll along the front?"

"No, of course- not," her aunt assured her. "There's plenty of time before dinner and I expect you'll be glad to stretch your legs a bit."

"Actually I thought I might make a note of where I'm

to go tomorrow for my interview," Kim confessed with a smile. "I know it's somewhere on the sea wall, like you are, but I'm not too sure how far along it is."

"It's called Linwood," her aunt informed her, unhesitatingly, "and it's the very big place right at the end, dear, you can't miss it."

"Then I'll go and have a preliminary peek," Kim said, "and see where I'm to work — always providing I get the job, of course."

"Of course you will," Aunt Bess told her confidently, and Kim smiled at her unfailing optimism. "Of course you will, dear."

Kim found it beautifully cool walking and a light breeze off the water was refreshingly welcome after the closeness of being indoors. She enjoyed walking and took her time discovering this end of Woodsea. There was, in fact, very little to discover along this part, for most of the houses and the few shops were along near the station, and she had already seen them when she arrived.

The sea wall was not very long, but it curved into a crescent shape and provided a casual ten-minute stroll, during which she encountered almost no other human being. Only the shrill reproach of seagulls heralded her presence, as they glided away to drift lazily over the water, waiting for her to pass before taking possession of the wall again. It was all so incredibly quiet and peaceful.

These houses, too, were all fairly large and had a placid, rather complacent air of wealth and leisure about them that Kim thoroughly approved of. Woodsea had never sought to become a holiday resort, indeed most of its present residents would have quickly departed if visitors had been encouraged, but it had an atmosphere of ease and lack of urgency that gave it a permanent holiday air. The small beach looked ideal for bathing from, but in fact it was only

really safe at one end of it, for along most of its length the water became too quickly deep and the shore shelved dangerously.

There was rocky terrain at either end, with Woodsea nestled like a refuge between ragged cliffs, and looking as if it had grown there rather than been built by man. Its natural harbour afforded shelter from the worst of the weather and the high cliffs either end made it a natural sun-trap, so that it suffered little in winter and could be almost tropical in summer.

One or two boats moored to the short wooden pier at the western end of the curve, gave it even more of a holiday look and added to its enchantment, and Kim thought it utterly delightful. The more she saw of Woodsea, the more convinced she was that she had done the right thing in coming there.

She found Linwood, the house she sought, very easily. As her aunt had said, she could not miss it, for it was right at the very end of the sea wall, actually standing in the shadow of the sheltering cliffs — a squat, red brick building, boldly Victorian and far less attractive than her aunt's grey stone house, but looking more opulent. The latter, Kim supposed, was only to be expected in view of the number of best-sellers its occupier had written.

A large garden completely surrounded it, looking neat and formal apart from some tall beech trees that stood to one side of the short driveway and shaded a wide area of the garden. It was not, she had to admit, quite the sort of house she had pictured for the type of man she had visualised George Daley to be. Something more dark and gloomy would have been more in keeping with her image of him.

She was sorely tempted for a moment to walk down the drive and introduce herself and hesitated by the wide open gates, a frown of indecision on her brow. She resisted the

temptation at last, as not only idiotic but unethical. She had no way of knowing whether she was the only applicant for the post, and to take such an impulsive step would not be likely to endear her to her prospective employer as she pictured him.

For the same reason she suddenly decided she had best not linger at the gates too long in case someone should see her from the house and take exception to her curiosity. She had just turned away and was about to walk off when she was hailed by someone coming up behind her.

"Hello, can **I** help you?" It was a woman's voice and it sounded friendly enough to make Kim smile, somewhat sheepishly, as she turned round.

"Well — er — no, not really, thank you. **I'm** just exploring."

"Oh, **I** see." She was about Kim's own age, but a little taller, with a mop of brown hair and blue eyes set in a not quite pretty face. She laughed almost apologetically, and shook her head, grimacing over her own assumption. "I'm sorry, **I** thought you were debating with yourself whether to go up to the house or not. Please do if you'd like to."

Kim looked at her with added interest. "I should be the one to apologise," she said. "**I** was standing and staring like an idiot and you must think me very rude, but — well, **I** came out with the **express**'purpose of finding this house and I'm afraid **I** stood longer than **I** should have done."

A smile dismissed her apology as unnecessary and the young woman shook her head again. "You're probably an admirer of George's, are you?" She cocked her head to one side and studied Kim with friendly, half-amused curiosity, then shook her head again. "No, on second thoughts, you don't look the blood and thunder type."

"Don't **I**?" Kim laughed, not only at the friendly uninhibited comment but the inaccuracy of it. "As it hap-

pens," she admitted, "I *am* an admirer of Mr. Daley's, but that's not the reason I'm here." She was wondering who the girl was and where she fitted into George Daley's household. She seemed far too bright and young to fit in with Kim's preconceived ideas. "Actually," she confessed, "I have an appointment with him tomorrow, for an interview, and I came along this evening to see just where it was I had to come. I'm hoping to get the post of secretary."

"Oh, I see," the girl nodded understanding, her blue eyes still friendly. "Well, I hope you'll be successful." She extended a hand. "I'm Fay Daley. The great George is my brother."

"Oh!" she could not conceal her surprise and she knew the other girl found it amusing. "I'm Kim Anders." She felt a little less apprehensive already about the coming interview. If this friendly young woman was his sister surely the character she had visualised for George Daley must be well off the mark.

"Kim?" Fay Daley was frowning over the name as many people did on first hearing it. "That's rather unusual for a girl, isn't it? Is it a contraction or your full name?" Before Kim could answer, the girl laughed apologetically. "I'm sorry, Miss Anders, but you can blame a natural curiosity for my bad manners, plus the fact that I research for my brother and asking questions *is* a habit I find hard to break."

"I don't mind," Kim assured her, nothing loath to explain her unusual name again, "it's short for Kimball, my mother's maiden name."

"It's nice," Fay Daley decreed with a smile. "Very unusual, and it suits you. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Miss Anders. We get so few new faces here, especially young ones."

"I'm staying with an aunt and uncle," Kim told her.

"They've retired here, like a lot of other people, so I understand. It's a popular place for retired people."

Fay Daley pulled a wry face. "A little too popular, I'm afraid," she said. "There are so few people under thirty that if one wants a bit of life it's necessary to go into Woodmouth."

"So my uncle warned me," Kim told her with a smile, "but I don't think I'll be too bothered, I'm already looking forward to sitting on that lovely sand and taking things easy when I'm not working. Always providing I get this job, of course," she added hastily.

Fay Daley studied her for a moment, some expression in her eyes that puzzled Kim. "Oh, you'll get it," she told her, "don't worry about that. I can guarantee it."

Her certainty, combined with that rather quizzical look, intrigued Kim. "I hope so," she said.

"What time's your appointment with George?" Fay asked.

"Half past eleven."

"Well, in that case," Fay told her, "I suggest you come half an hour earlier and have coffee with us, will you?"

"Of course, I'd like to," Kim smiled, delighted to have been accepted so readily, at least by one member of the family, "thank you."

Her thanks were dismissed airily. "Good, then we'll see you tomorrow about eleven. 'Bye for now."

"Good-bye." Kim smiled after the small, neat figure as it went down the drive, wondering at her good fortune in meeting Fay Daley, although she was still rather puzzled by the other girl's rather disconcerting assurance that she would certainly get the job.

She thought she had time still to go a bit further and accordingly turned and began to walk up the fairly steep slope of smooth turf that ran up from the end of the sea

wall and to a small, flat area where it was possible to sit and overlook the sea.

The really high cliffs were further on still, but for the moment she felt this spot was high enough and she stood for several minutes on the sun-warmed turf, looking out at the glittering, shimmer of the water only gently rippling in the light wind. An occasional creamy curl of foam raised itself from the blue and fluttered along to extinction at the rock face, dainty and fragile as soft lace.

It was idyllic, she thought, and not at all the sort of environment she could imagine inspiring violent crime novels of the sort George Daley wrote, although obviously he would disagree with her. Now that she had been more or less obliged to rethink her picture of George Daley, she was a bit uncertain just what to expect. Anyway, she shrugged, at least she faced the interview with less trepidation than she had until now, and she could already see herself working in the old red brick house quite happily.

A hasty glance at her watch, a few seconds later, reminded her that it would soon be time for dinner and that she should be starting back if she did not want to be late for dinner on her first day.

She had covered quite a lot of the distance back to the house, when something caught her eye and made her frown uneasily. She stopped almost involuntarily and looked across at the small lone figure sitting on the wall, hesitating to go over to him, but feeling instinctively that she should.

She quite liked children as a rule, although she had had very little to do with them, and this one seemed in some danger of falling if he stayed where he was for much longer. True, he would not fall into the sea, only on to the sandy beach below the wall, but from where he sat, with his feet dangling, it was quite a fall for a little fellow like that and he would get some nasty bruises if nothing worse.

She looked around to see if anyone was with him or showed any interest in him, but there was no one else anywhere near. Such a little boy, she felt, should not have been out alone even in such a small, quiet place as Woodsea.

He had an air of pathos that touched her heart as she watched him, uncertain what she should do for the best.

Her conscience decided for her at last and she walked across to him with not the slightest idea of what she would say to him; he half-turned his head as she approached, glancing up at her with the reproachful, self-righteous look of little boys who have been scolded.

It was difficult not to smile as she crouched down beside him on the edge of the wall. "Are you lost?" she asked, and he shook his head.

"No." The answer was brief and to the point, but **it put** Kim at a disadvantage again in that she had to try again.

"Hadh't you better go home?" she suggested hopefully.

Again he answered in a discouraging monosyllable.

"Why?"

"Well, it's getting late," Kim ventured, "and I'm sure your mummy will be worrying about you, won't she?"

His frown was as discouraging as his answers. "She won't." The gravelly little voice was adamant in its certainty. "She's gone."

"Gone?" Kim blinked her uncertainty, all manner of unpleasant possibilities entering her head at the cryptic answer. "But you must have a home to go to, haven't you?" The tow-coloured head nodded doubtfully. "Then let me walk home with you, shall **I?**" Kim offered persuasively, and put out a hand which, to her relief, he accepted after only a brief hesitation.

When he climbed back on to the wall beside her she realised that he was even smaller than she had anticipated and so dejected-looking that she felt renewed pity for him

as she held on to his hand firmly, allowing him to lead the way.

He seemed to be taking her in the direction she wanted to go, anyway, and that at least was quite a relief, though what she would do if he proved *not* to know where he was going was something she would have to worry about when it happened.

"What's *your* name?" he asked suddenly and disarmingly, and Kim smiled, encouraged by the slightly less dismal expression he wore.

"My name's Anders," she obliged, "Kim Anders. What's yours?"

"Lee." He apparently thought that identity enough, for he offered no other and Kim was uncertain whether it was surname or christian name. She was beginning to doubt, too, the wisdom of letting him take the lead. He was rather young to know what he was doing, and old enough to hate admitting it, but he had a rather daunting air of self-confidence about him, considering her own uncertainty.

"Do you know where you live, Lee?" she asked.

He nodded, as if he had no doubts at all on that score. "This way," he told her.

Feeling rather like a lamb being led to the slaughter, Kim followed the slight tug on her right hand. "Have you been gone a long time?" she asked.

Again he nodded. "I ran away," he informed her, and with such solemnity that she found it hard not to start and show surprise. He could have been no more than four years old and yet he had all the panache of an experienced absconder, now that he was on his way home again. "I'm gone to be a sailor soon," he informed her before she could comment or disapprove.

"Oh, are you?" They were almost at her aunt's front gate by now, and she wondered if she should call in and

explain the situation, as her aunt might even know who the child was, but before she could decide someone came out of the gate of the garden next door and she flushed to recognise her tormentor of earlier on.

The brown hair and very light eyes were a combination not easy to forget, and they gave her the clue she needed. She had noticed both when he had watched her and her uncle go past as they left the station, but his height she was not prepared for.

He stood by the gate, unbelievably tall and seemingly quite unperturbed as he watched her approach hand in hand with her tiny companion, the light grey eyes alight with something that could have been laughter. He was better looking than she had realised too, and rather disconcertingly attractive at close quarters, neither of which endeared him to Kim, who considered good-looking and attractive men far too sure of themselves.

"I see you've found my wandering sailor," he told her, and she frowned when the little boy left her side, all too willingly it seemed, and walked up to him. The child's eyes were reproachful again when he looked up at the enormous figure that dwarfed him, but also undeniably relieved.

"He's — he's one of yours?" Kim asked, her eyes wide with disbelief when she remembered her own opinion of the children in the back of the car. That he appeared entirely unconcerned about the child surprised her not at all, for he struck her as the type of man who was completely lacking in feeling, even for his own children.

"You might say so," he agreed blithely, and smiled. "He's number two, Lee by name, in case he hasn't already introduced himself. I'm James Fleming."

She took the proffered hand warily and merely touched it for as long as politeness demanded, finding it annoyingly difficult to stop the slightly dizzy feeling she had from the

effect of that smile. "I found Lee down on the sea wall," she informed him, stiffly disapproving and determined not to be won over, "and I think you should take better care of a boy as small as that. He could have fallen and hurt himself."

"Probably he could," he agreed quietly, a different expression in his gaze now as he turned the child round and sent him, with a light pat on his bottom, into the garden and towards the house, "but so far he hasn't, and we live in hopes."

"You — you mean you knew where he was and you — !" Kim sought for words to express her disgust at his lack of concern, but instead succeeded only in appearing inarticulate.

He was smiling again, obviously suspecting her frustration and finding it amusing. "Miss —?" he cocked a quizzical brow at her and she responded automatically.

"Anders," she supplied, "Kim Anders."

"You're staying with Mrs. Keeler, aren't you?" he asked.

"I am," Kim agreed. "She's my aunt." She felt oddly gauche and uneasy as he watched her. There was something very disturbing about James Fleming that made her horribly self-conscious, and she resented the way he was studying her.

"I thought you were," he remarked. "I saw you at the station when Mr. Keeler collected you."

"You saw me," Kim agreed coldly, "and you splashed me from head to foot with filthy black water."

To her surprise he did not try to deny it, but grimaced ruefully. "I know," he admitted, "but I didn't realise I had until the monsters told me. They were laughing their heads off, and when they told me why, I started back to apologise, but I was too late, you passed me on your way here."

So that was the explanation, Kim thought, but did not

admit to having seen him. That he had told her his intention rather surprised her and she nodded briefly to acknowledge the belated apology. "You needn't have troubled," she informed him, knowing she was not being very gracious about what had, after all, been an accident, "the damage was already done."

His eyes positively gleamed at her grudging acceptance and he eyed her speculatively, as if trying to prejudge her reaction to his next words. "In a way," he told her, "it was your own fault you got splashed. You stepped off the kerb in front of me and I was so busy trying to avoid running you down that I didn't see the puddle. You should be more careful and look before you leap."

It was obvious he had no intention of taking the whole blame and what he said was near enough to the truth to be discomfiting. "I would have thought," she told him, "that that puddle was impossible *not* to see — it was big enough."

"Possibly," he allowed, "but I wasn't looking for puddles at that moment, I was trying to avoid a jay-walker."

She could not let him get away with it altogether. "My coat's ruined," she insisted, and he grinned as if he followed her train of thought all too easily.

"Well, send me the cleaning bill by all means," he offered. "I've already told the monsters off for laughing, hence Lee's little drama."

Kim eyed him suspiciously. "You mean he ran off because you scolded him for laughing?"

"That's right." He still sounded quite unconcerned that the boy could have come to harm.

"And you weren't worried about him at all?" His callousness appalled her and she showed it.

He shrugged. "What's the use?" he asked. "He'll do it again. It's his favourite form of protest."

"Why, you're — you're unbelievable," Kim gasped. "A

baby like that! Anything might have happened to him and you — you just shrug it off! You're not fit to have charge of small children, you must be the most — most unfeeling father that ever lived. Poor little mites!"

"You're a child expert?" There was a dangerous quietness in his voice which even Kim, in her anger, recognised and she shook her head.

"No — no, I'm not, but I know that children need love and care, and that poor little soul must have been very unhappy to have run away from home at his age."

He looked at her steadily for a moment, saying nothing, and she realised how rash she had been in her condemnation of him. It could not be easy for a man alone to manage several small children and the little one she had seen appeared rebellious rather than cowed, and certainly not neglected.

"Perhaps you'd care to take on the responsibility of them?" he suggested quietly. "I agree they need a woman's hand, but that's something I'm unable to provide at the moment, so perhaps you'd care to take the job on?"

"No, of course not," Kim denied hastily, lowering her own gaze as the colour rushed to her face. There was something so disconcerting about that light-eyed scrutiny that made her wish fervently she had not started the argument. It was, she realised, a highly unsuitable situation to get into with a stranger, especially here in the street, and she thanked heaven there was no one else to witness her indiscretion.

"Then suppose you leave the ways and means to me," he told her with a short laugh that mocked her embarrassment. "I'm not an expert, I admit, but I haven't done so badly up to now. In fact," he added with a grin, "I think the little monsters quite like being with me."

Kim could not argue on that point since she did not

know enough about either him or the children, and she was increasingly aware that she had probably made a complete fool of herself by attacking him as she had. '

Not that he seemed to be holding it against her; all the animosity had so far been on her side, and it began to dawn on her that it might be a good idea to make a strategic withdrawal while she still could. She said no more, but hoped her dignity could stand up in the face of his rather obvious amusement.

She gave him a meaningful look before turning into the gate of Summer House, horribly conscious, as she walked up the path to the front door, of his gaze following her and the half smile that claimed victory for the last word.

CHAPTER II

AUNT BESS raised the subject of James Fleming, quite a bit later in the day, and Kim wished it could have been allowed to stay unmentioned. Her aunt had eyed her heightened colour when she came in at dinner time, but she said nothing until afterwards when they all sat in the sitting-room talking.

"Were you annoyed about something when you came in, dear?" Aunt Bess asked, and Kim smiled ruefully.

"I'd been talking to your neighbour," she told her, "and I must say he *doesn't* improve with acquaintance."

"Mr. Fleming?" Aunt Bess asked with an accuracy that betrayed knowledge, and Kim wondered if she had seen them from a window.

"Mr. Fleming," she agreed, "the monster."

Aunt Bess raised curious brows. "I've never really said more than good morning a couple of times, all the while he's been here," she admitted, "although I've had occasion to mention to his housekeeper or cleaner whoever she is that I thought the children shouldn't be allowed to make quite so much noise in the garden. What did he have to say that was so upsetting?"

"I wasn't exactly upset," Kim denied, "but I *was* cross about the way he treats the children. I saw one of them on the sea wall, quite alone and in quite a dangerous position for such a little chap, and that — that man was so completely unconcerned about him and the fact that he'd run away that I lost my temper, I'm afraid. He's the most unnatural father *I've* ever seen."

"He's certainly very unconventional," Aunt Bess allowed,

as blandly unconcerned it seemed as James Fleming had been, though obviously curious. "I've heard the children call him by nothing but his christian name, and I'm sure it can't be good for discipline."

"I don't imagine he's concerned enough about them to discipline them," Kim stated rashly. "He's far too conceited to bother about anyone else's feelings."

"There doesn't appear to *be a* mother," Aunt Bess said, ignoring her husband's look of patient resignation when he recognised her gossip voice, as he called it.

"She's gone according to the little one I saw," Kim told her. "Though he didn't specify where or why and I couldn't ask, naturally."

"No, I suppose not," Aunt Bess admitted, obviously not quite seeing it that way, "but it explains why they're left with only the father. I wonder," she mused, a moment later, "whether she died or if they're just parted."

"Could be either," Kim retorted. "He'd drive anyone to an early grave, that man."

"Ah well," Aunt Bess sighed, "either way, he seems to have found consolation fairly quickly."

Kim tried not to be interested, but could not keep the curious lift from her brows, and John Keeler sighed at the inevitability of it. "What your aunt means," he explained, "is that Fleming sees quite a lot of a rather stunning blonde who drives a red sports car."

"Oh, I see." Kim tried to fit in the picture of three probably unruly children with *a* stunning blonde in a sports car, and failed. James Fleming, she thought, would be quite at home with both the car and the blonde, but not the children, although she had to admit he had not been unduly harsh with the little boy.

"She often comes here," Aunt Bess enlarged, "so I imagine he must be fairly serious about her."

"I can't quite see a glamorous blonde and three children being a very easy combination," Kim opined. "Something will probably have to give and I can guess who it will be."

"Maybe they spend half their time with the mother and half here," Aunt Bess suggested. "They've been here about three or four months now, and he was here about the same length of time on his own before that."

"Poor little souls," Kim sighed, rather self-righteously. "He seemed such a dear little chap, the one I saw — Lee, he was."

"I think that's the middle one," Aunt Bess told her, and Kim nodded.

"He said Lee was number two," she agreed.

"Then there's one younger than him and one older," her aunt stated with certainty.

"I feel so sorry for them," Kim declared, determinedly sentimental. Not that it really concerned her, of course, but someone should care about the children, she thought.

Rather more nervous than she admitted, Kim set off next morning for the big house at the end of the sea wall. She had dressed in what she hoped would be considered suitable attire for a crime-writer's secretary, discarding the idea of plain navy blue, which her previous boss had preferred, in favour of something a little less severe.

The deep green, short-sleeved dress suited her admirably — becoming without being frivolous and businesslike without being severe. Her very fair hair, naturally curly and very thick, was brushed into as neat a style as it would go, and a faint look of anxiety in her dark blue eyes made them very appealing. She had been extra careful with her make-up too, and she thought she looked as well as she had ever done.

Aunt Bess assured her that she looked very suitable, whatever that may have implied, but Uncle John, with his unfailing courtesy, had told her that she looked lovely and that George Daley would be bound to employ her for that reason alone, if for no other.

She had kept a careful eye on the time, hoping to arrive just right, rather than late or embarrassingly earlier, and another glance at her watch assured her that she still had five minutes until eleven o'clock and just about enough distance to cover to bring her to Linwood at the right time.

She smoothed an anxious hand over her hair as she turned into the drive and hoped her shoes would not be thought too holiday-like for a prospective employee. They were cream-coloured and very new and, while she despaired of their remaining spotless for very long on the dusty gravel underfoot, she knew they complimented her slim ankles and rather good legs. Not that she was vain, she told herself, but a girl must make the most of her good points, and this job was very important to her in more ways than one. It would be far too humiliating to have to go back to London and admit that she had made a mistake in acting so impulsively.

She heard a car start up as she neared the house and a moment later recognised the same blue vehicle she had encountered so disastrously at the station yesterday. It swept past her down the drive, going fast enough to lift a haze of red dust as it came, and she had time enough only to recognise James Fleming's lean, smiling face and a hand raised in salute, before she was enveloped in it.

His passenger, she thought, as she fanned the air around her, was blonde, though she had not had time to judge her stunning or otherwise. She stood for a moment, glaring after the car and brushing the reddish dust from her dress, looking down hopelessly at her once cream shoes and won-

dering if she was too near the house to use a handkerchief on them.

"Miss Anders?" Kim looked up hastily as a long shadow fell across her, the dust-laden handkerchief still clutched in one hand, her eyes wide with surprise and a little startled.

"Er — yes," she admitted, pink-cheeked at being caught in such an inelegant position, "I'm Kim Anders."

She straightened up and found herself face to face with a man whose face she had so often tried to visualise. "I'm George Daley," he told her, smiling understandingly at her obvious embarrassment. "My sister told me you'd be coming for coffee; she also said you were very pretty, and she's right on both counts, I'm glad to see."

He was so entirely different from anything she had imagined that she stared at him for a moment in disbelief, unable to find words even to answer his greeting. A look that could only have been described as flirtatious approved her from head to toe, despite the effect of the dust, and he proffered a hand in greeting.

"I — I hope you don't mind," Kim said anxiously, finding her voice at last. "About my coming for coffee, I mean. Miss Daley said it would be all right if I came at eleven and —"

"Of course it's all right," he assured her, still retaining his hold on her hand, "I'm delighted you could come early, and if Fay *hadn't* invited you I'd never have forgiven her."

"Thank you." She thought she saw the reason now for Fay Daley's assurance that she would get the job. Evidently she knew her brother's penchant for judging by appearances and guessed he would find her attractive, and she was more than ever glad that she had taken extra care with her appearance.

He glanced down at the shoes she had been dusting and raised a brow in query. "Were you having trouble with

your shoes?" he asked.

"No, not really," Kim demurred, hesitating to be too damning in her opinion of James Fleming in case he was a close friend of his. "A car drove past just now and I — well, I got rather dusty. I was just trying to clean up my shoes."

"Oh, that would have been James Fleming," he told her. "He does have occasional touches of Jackie Stewart in his driving. I must tell him about it."

"I'm afraid he wouldn't be very impressed," Kim told him wryly. "We've crossed swords before, only yesterday it was mud all over a new coat, today it's my shoes."

"Oh dear." He looked down at her shoes again. "They're such pretty shoes too, and *very* flattering." He smiled at her and Kim realised that her prospective employer was not only charming, but dangerously so, and she smiled, a little uneasily.

He took her into the house, which was cool and airy after the hot sun outside, through a wide hall and into a sitting-room which looked out across a long, tree-shaded garden. It was a lovely room and much more attractive than anything the outside appearance of the house promised.

Fay Daley was already pouring coffee when they came in and she looked up with the same friendly smile Kim had seen yesterday. "Good morning, Miss Anders, it's nice to see you again."

Kim accepted the seat she was offered and also a cup of excellent coffee, relieved to find herself so welcome. It was difficult not to feel at ease with these two nice people and she faced the coming interview with almost no misgivings now.

"James has just smothered Miss Anders with dust," George Daley informed his sister. "She seemed worried about how she looked, but I assured her she had nothing to

worry about on that score." That flirtatious look swept over her again and Kim could not help but smile in return, though in some men the gesture would have been offensive and earned them a frown of disapproval.

"I'm sorry about the dust," Fay Daley told her. "It can be very bad, even after rain, it's the sand in the gravel that's the trouble and it gets into everything, especially when it's windy."

"I'm not too bad really," Kim assured her, "but it was my shoes I was thinking about. They're a silly colour, I suppose, they'll show the dirt so badly."

"They're very pretty," Fay commented, as her brother had done, "it's such a pity to spoil them. Didn't James see you?"

"It seems he has it in for Miss Anders," George Daley informed her. "Yesterday he covered her in mud." He repeated as much of the incident as Kim had told him and Fay shook her head.

"I don't suppose he realised what he'd done either time," she said, in James Fleming's defence. "He's not usually bad-mannered like that, Miss Anders, but," she shrugged and made a grimace of explanation at Kim, "you know what men are."

"Oh, not all of us, Fay," her brother objected. "I'd *never* have treated Miss Anders in such a cavalier fashion, she's far too lovely."

He looked at Kim with such earnestness that, had it not been for the expression in his eyes, she would have believed him sincere; as it was she could afford to smile and not be thought ungracious.

He was so unlike she had imagined him that she was still amazed that she could have been so wrong. He was a little fairer than his sister and wore his hair rather long so that it touched the collar of his shirt at the back and combined

with a flowing cravat, worn loosely knotted, it gave him an almost poetic appearance, an effect she suspected he cultivated deliberately. His eyes were blue, a dark grey-blue that could change with the light and which would always reveal his thoughts no matter what he spoke. He was gazing at her now, rather disconcertingly obvious in his flattery.

"George," his sister explained resignedly, "likes pretty girls, and since you come into that category, Miss Anders, I'm afraid you'll come in for your share of flattery."

To many another man, the sisterly opinion offered so frankly, would have deterred him into embarrassed silence, but George Daley seemed quite unperturbed by it and merely smiled at Kim over his coffee cup.

"Don't listen to Fay," he told her with a smile, "unless she tells you I have excellent taste."

Kim found his admiration a little overpowering, but it was extremely good for her morale, and he *was* very attractive.

"When can you start, Miss Anders?"

The question so surprised Kim that she blinked for a moment uncertainly. "I — I can start any time you like, Mr. Daley," she managed at last, "but — but I came for an interview, I thought —"

"Well, this is an interview, isn't it?" he asked, his brows and one long hand raised in query. "You don't insist on the boss behind the desk bit, do you?"

"No, no, of course not." Kim was a little bewildered at the way things were going, but she was nothing loath to dispense with formality if that was what he wanted. George Daley, she thought, would be quite the most unconventional employer she had ever had.

"Fay tells me you shorten your rather charming name to Kim," he said, putting down his cup and clasping his hands between his knees, "so if you've no objections I shall

call you Kim, O.K.?"

"Yes, yes, of course, Mr. Daley, I don't mind in the least."

"But **I shall** mind," he told her with mock severity, "if you call me Mr. Daley. I never allow beautiful women to call me anything but George. It may not be the most romantic name there is, but it's the only one **I** have and it hasn't been a drawback so far." The meaning behind his last words was obvious and Kim smiled, a little hesitantly.

"You did say you were living in Woodsea, didn't you, Kim?" Fay Daley asked, to relieve some of the embarrassment her brother's manner had caused.

Kim nodded. "I'm staying with an aunt and uncle just along the road, so it will **be** very convenient for coming here."

"Very," George agreed and added with a sly smile, "although if you'd been looking for somewhere to stay we could have put you up here. We've plenty of room."

"I'll be all right with Aunt Bess, thank you," Kim assured him, "they're quite pleased to have me."

"So should I be," George insisted, his eyes battering her outrageously, "but stay with your auntie if you're settled there."

"**I shall be now**," Kim said. "**I** can send for the rest of my things."

"Do." He studied her for a moment with that half-quizzical, entirely flattering gaze. "We shall get on marvellously," he told her. "Of course **I** usually prefer brunettes, but **I shall** make an exception in your case."

"Thank you." She tried to sound cool and matter-of-fact and was aware of Fay Daley watching her with approval. "Shall **I** start tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Whenever you like, darling, but **I** warn you there's a lot to catch up on. I'm not a bad boss and **I** shan't

expect you to work your pretty fingers to the bone for me. All I demand is a monopoly on your spare time." His eyes flicked expressively over her face again. "I shall *love* having you around all day," he added, and Fay laughed.

"George, for heaven's sake don't embarrass Kim," she warned, "or she may change her mind about coming to work for you."

"Oh no !" He looked horrified at the prospect, an expression that did not reach his eyes. "You wouldn't do that, would you, Kim?"

Kim laughed, despite herself. "No," she assured him, "I'll be here in the morning, Mr. Daley."

"George," he insisted, and she inclined her head.

"George," she said obediently.

He walked with her as far as the gates, taking her arm in easy familiarity as they went. "Do you live anywhere near James Fleming?" he asked, and Kim nodded, her expression wary.

"Next door to him, unfortunately." She bit her lip when she realised. "Oh, I'm sorry, he's a friend of yours, isn't he? I'm sorry."

George laughed. "No need to be," he told her. "Actually he's Eve's friend rather than mine and Fay's, although we get on fine with him."

Kim remembered the blonde passenger in James Fleming's car and wondered if she was the same one who drove the red sports car, and whom her uncle had described as stunning.

"Eve ?" She made no attempt to disguise her curiosity and he grinned as if he recognised it. "Another sister?"

"No, a cousin," he said. "She honours us with her presence occasionally and she usually runs around with James when she's here."

Kim smiled wryly. "My uncle described Mr. Fleming's

usual companion as stunning," she ventured, wondering if she was being too confiding. There was something about the Daleys that inspired confidence.

George smiled wryly. "You could say so," he allowed, but without enthusiasm, "but personally I prefer my roses without thorns."

"Oh, I see."

"I'm sure you do," he laughed. "Eve is what is graphically termed a bitch, a pseudonym I always think is rather unfair to lady dogs."

"She's your cousin," Kim protested, but could not help smiling at his frankness.

"She's also a very much revered fashion columnist," George told her, "but that doesn't make her any more lovable."

"Is she?" Kim looked impressed. "Would I know her name?"

"I should think so," he replied casually. "Eve Mellors."

"Eve Mellors ! " She grimaced wryly. "*Very* well known."

"That's our Eve," he agreed, grinning down at her as if he found her reaction amusing. "Didn't you know?" he asked.

"It never even occurred to me," Kim admitted. She was intrigued by the fact that the woman she had seen pictured at the top of the fashion page in one of the big glossy magazines so often should turn out to be her uncle's stunning blonde. It was even more intriguing to wonder how the rather brittle-looking creature Eve Mellors appeared to be would deal with three small children. James Fleming, it seemed, would have a problem on his hands if he ever decided to marry her. For some reason, *that* idea pleased her enormously.

It was more than a fortnight after Kim came to Summer

House that she again had reason to complain to James Fleming about the children. During the time she had been with her aunt she had learned that the eldest of the children was called Ronnie and that he was six, and the youngest a little girl of two, christened Teresa but called Terry by her brothers.

She had spoken to them across the hedge from her aunt's back garden and the children had regarded her suspiciously at first, but by now they were more friendly, encouraged by the little girl. Kim had asked them their names and how old they were, but she had drawn the line at questioning them about their father or anything else he could possibly take exception to. Instead she confined herself to childish subjects they were interested in. They never once, she noticed, referred to their father as anything but James.

Little Terry seemed to take to Kim after her initial shyness and Kim suspected she missed her mother far more than the boys did. Kim had seen James Fleming several times and had always politely acknowledged his greeting, but never attempted to take the acquaintance into the conversational stage. For some reason she could not explain she always found him disconcerting to speak to, and she knew that she invariably coloured like a shy schoolgirl each time, a fact which did nothing to endear him to her.

She liked the children, but could not bring herself to even begin liking their father. Terry she grew increasingly fond of and she always thought the tiny girl such a soulful waif that she instinctively blamed James Fleming the more for her pathos.

It was Terry she found outside the front gate crying one morning when she went out to work. The chubby little face was streaked with tears and grubby from rubbing her eyes with her hands. "What's the matter, Terry?" Kim crouched down beside her, using a clean handkerchief to wipe her

tearful face. "Tell me about it."

There was no sign of anyone coming to look for the child and Kim could hear the muffled hum of a vacuum cleaner in the house. Presumably the housekeeper was busy with her cleaning and unaware that one of her charges had escaped.

Terry eyed her for a moment anxiously. "Lee," she said, "gone."

"Oh no, not again!" Kim groaned inwardly at the prospect as she mopped Terry's face again and planted a cautious kiss on one damp cheek. "Don't cry, darling, we'll find Lee. You go in and I'll look for him."

"Gone," Terry insisted, and added dauntingly, "Wonnie."

"Ronnie too?" Kim gazed at her uncertainly. "Are you sure, Terry?" Whether the child understood or not, she nodded, and Kim stood up, glancing hastily at her watch. She had little enough time to spare before she was due to start work, but she thought George would not be unreasonable in the circumstances.

"Gone," Terry reminded her plaintively, and Kim sighed.

"Come on," she told her, taking her hand, "I'll pop you in the house and then go and look for Ronnie and Lee, I don't suppose they've gone very far."

The housekeeper was an elderly woman who looked rather flushed and harassed when she answered the door to Kim's ring, and she blinked her surprise when she saw Terry. "Oh, they're a real handful," she told Kim. "I need eyes in the back of my head."

Kim nodded understanding. "I'm sure you do, and I don't want to make things worse, but are you sure the boys are in the garden? Terry seems to think they're gone."

"Oh, lord!" The anxious face creased further. "I was so

sure they'd stay there until I'd finished cleaning." She hurried off, leaving Kim with Terry just inside the front door.

"Gone," Terry insisted, and a few seconds later her claim was confirmed when the housekeeper returned looking even more anxious.

"They're *not* there," she told Kim. "Neither of them. They've both gone off somewhere."

"And left Terry behind because she couldn't keep up," Kim guessed, and sighed. "Well, we'd better try and find them, Mrs. —"

"Pannet," the woman supplied absently. "I don't know what Mr. Fleming will say when he knows, he'll be very cross."

"Well, I don't see how he can blame you," Kim retorted. "You can't be expected to clean *and* keep an eye on three children."

"He did say he'd get a full-time girl to look after them," Mrs. Pannet told her, "but I don't think —" She stopped, *as* if she had almost overstepped the bounds of discretion. "I'd better leave this and look for the boys."

"They may not have gone far," Kim consoled her, "Lee had only got as far as the sea wall once before when he ran off, so maybe they're both down there. I have to walk along that way, Mrs. Pannet, so we may as well walk together."

"Thank you." The woman looked harassed and Kim felt sorry for her. She was not of an age when coping with three small children came easily.

Terry clung to Kim's hand as they went along the sea wall, but there was no sign of the two small boys, and for the first time Kim felt an odd, empty coldness in the pit of her stomach. She could not, she felt, leave Mrs. Pannet to cope with the situation alone, so she gave up all idea of being on time that morning, praying that George would be

as understanding as she hoped.

"*Now* where do we look?" Mrs. Pannet asked. "I've never known them both go off before. Lee often does, but never Ronnie. I can't understand it."

They looked along both sides of the sea wall, but there was absolutely no sign of the boys and Mrs. Pannet's pale face betrayed the fact that she shared Kim's horrible feeling of helplessness. "Perhaps we should notify the police," Kim suggested, but Mrs. Pannet shook her head.

"I don't think Mr. Fleming would like that," she told her. "Not without asking him first."

"If he cared anything about them he'd make sure they were better taken care of," Kim retorted. "Not that I'm blaming you," she added hastily. "It's not fair to put such a responsibility on you."

"Oh, I don't mind too much," Mrs. Pannet assured her. "Mr. Fleming's been very good to me and the children aren't too much trouble as a rule, it's just that — well, lately things have upset them."

"Like Miss Eve Mellors," Kim hazarded a guess, and saw that she was right when Mrs. Pannet blinked uneasily.

"They don't seem to take to her," she admitted, and Kim was hardly surprised.

"I can imagine," was all she committed herself to. "Now we'd better ring Mr. Fleming and let him know that the boys are missing — *if* he cares."

"Oh, he does," Mrs. Pannet protested, "he loves the children."

"Then he should take more care of them," Kim said, adamantly refusing to give James Fleming any credit at all.

It was Kim who rang the number Mrs. Pannet gave her and a woman's voice answered, a cool, businesslike voice that informed her she was speaking to Fleming Enterprises.

Kim swallowed hard on her momentary surprise and asked for Mr. James Fleming. There were buzzes and clicks and then another female voice, equally cool and businesslike, informed her that Mr. Fleming was at a board meeting and definitely could not be disturbed. She sounded as if she expected argument and was prepared to deal with it as a good secretary should.

"Is that Miss Mellors?" the voice asked, and Kim felt an almost overwhelming temptation to say it was; instead she weakened and was honest.

"No, it isn't," she said, "it's Miss Anders."

Kim felt sure she detected a hint of polite surprise in the voice when it spoke again. "Oh! Well, I'm sorry, Miss Anders, but Mr. Fleming is *not available* at the moment. Shall I tell him you called?"

"I just wanted to —" Kim began, but the smooth voice interrupted her.

"I'm sorry, Miss Anders, there's a call on the other line. Will you hold on?"

"But —"

"Excuse me." The receiver at the other end was put down heavily and Kim hastily moved the instrument away from her ear.

"Oh, never mind I " she said crossly to the silent telephone, and slammed the receiver down hard, her eyes blazing angrily. Even at a distance she could lose her temper with James Fleming, or at least with those who worked for him.

Mrs. Pannet looked at her anxiously. "Did you tell him?" she asked, and Kim shook her head.

"Mr. Fleming," she told her scathingly, "is otherwise engaged — with a board meeting."

"Oh dear." Mrs. Pannet bit her lip. "What shall we do?"

"I suggest we notify the police," Kim told her, "whether

Mr. Fleming likes it or not."

The police sergeant at the tiny Woodsea police station was most sympathetic, but he considered it rather too early to panic about the boys. They wouldn't have gone far, he assured them, but he would take their descriptions and pass it on to Woodmouth and the men on the beat would look out for them. It was all that could be done at the moment, and Mrs. Pannet thanked Kim, though she still looked so much at a loss that Kim decided to help her continue the search when she had let George know why she had not appeared for work that morning.

"Of course I understand, Kim darling," he told her when she reported to him, a little shamefaced for not letting him know before. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm worried about those two little boys," Kim confessed. "I'd hate it if anything happened to them."

"I doubt if anything has," George consoled her, - "Kids are pretty independent little objects, aren't they? And from what I've heard of these three they're craftier than most."

"They're only babies," Kim reproached him, "and *somebody* should care about them."

George beamed her a smile and put an arm round her shoulders, hugging her close for a second. "Well, you care about them, my little angel of mercy, and don't you give me another thought until they're safely returned to the fold."

"Thank you, George. You're very — nice." She gave him a smile and he pulled a face.

"Only nice?" he asked. "Couldn't you enlarge on that?"

"I will," Kim promised, "when **I** have time. Right now I have to try and find two little boys."

Woodsea may only have been a very small community, but by the time she and Mrs. Pannet had walked over every inch of it Kim felt that it was the whole world. She was

wearing shoes that were not intended for so much activity and she was soon not only tired but irritable.

Only one woman, of all the people they asked, had seen two small boys, and she thought she had seen two answering the description of Ronnie and Lee walking along the Merrick Road. Merrick Road, Mrs. Pannet informed Kim, led on to the main Woodmouth road, and Kim's heart sank at the prospect when she thought of all the passing traffic and the vulnerability of two such small boys on their own.

Forced at last to abandon the search and leave it to the police, they returned to Sea Wall, and it was only then that Kim realised with a start that her aunt and uncle had no idea that she had been otherwise occupied than with George Daley's secretarial work. As she broke the news to them she felt again that maddening sense of helplessness.

"I just don't know where to look," she said. "They could be anywhere; they could even have walked as far as Woodmouth, I suppose, although it's an awful long way."

"It's much too far for two such little chaps," her uncle protested. "Unless of course they caught a bus."

Kim blinked at the possibility. "I suppose they could have if they had some money with them," she mused. "I hadn't thought of that."

It was just before one o'clock when she heard a car outside, and from the window she saw James Fleming's blue car turning into the driveway of his house. She just took enough time to make quite sure it was him before she opened the door and went out. Someone, she felt, should break the news to him gently. Despite her anger with him earlier, she hated to think of any man having such news sprung on him suddenly and without warning.

"Mr. Fleming ! "

He had been about to close the front door behind him when she called and he turned his head, obviously surprised

that she had spoken to him. "Yes, Miss Anders?"

He came out of the house again, pulling the door to behind him. "I'm — **I'm** afraid that something awful's happened." She knew she was wording it badly, that she was making it sound far worse than it was, so far, but it was proving much harder to say than she had expected, and the fact that they had the dividing hedge between them did not help matters at all. She felt very much at a disadvantage, for he could see over it quite easily, being over a foot higher than the hedge, but Kim was only at eye-level with the top of it and she felt overshadowed and very small, especially with those light eyes fixed on her so enquiringly.

"Have you seen Mrs. Pannet yet?" she asked, and he shook his head, obviously puzzled.

"No, **I** haven't, we've only just arrived." She scarcely noticed the plural he used, she was so anxious. "**I** don't understand," he went on, a slight frown between his brows. "What's happened? Terry's all right, isn't she?"

"Oh yes. It isn't Terry, it's — it's Ronnie and Lee."

His frown deepened and he sighed a little impatiently. "I'm sorry, Miss Anders, I'm just not with you."

"They're — they're missing." She could find no way of wrapping it up, making it sound less stark, and she stared at him in horror when he laughed. "You — you monster!" she gasped, her eyes blazing, yet near to tears when she thought of the fruitless search she and Mrs. Pannet had made. They had worn themselves out looking in vain for the children, and Kim's feet were still aching. They had been worried to death about them, and yet he cared so little he was actually laughing. The man wasn't even human! "How can you possibly laugh when those two little mites are wandering around, heaven knows where and in heaven knows what danger?"

"Those two little mites, as you call them," he told her,

sobering a little but with a hint of laughter still in his voice, "are at this moment plaguing Mrs. Pannet for their lunch, unless I miss my guess. I've just brought them home."

"You've you've just — ooh !" She clenched her hands, relief and anger fighting for precedence. She was unutterably relieved that Ronnie and Lee were safe, but so angry she could cheerfully have hit him. "Do you realise the police are looking for them? And that Mrs. Pannet and I have spent the entire morning searching all over Woodsea for them?"

That, she noted with satisfaction, really surprised him, and he looked down over the hedge at her with an expression both guilty and disbelieving, the latter slightly prevalent. "The police?" he echoed. "Why, for heaven's sake?"

"Of course the police," she said scornfully. "The boys were missing and Mrs. Pannet was worried to death. I tried to phone you, but apparently you were otherwise engaged on more important matters."

"Wait a minute!" He snapped his fingers. "Miss Norton said someone had phoned, and she *did* say Miss Anders, now I come to think of it, but she said the woman hung up while she was answering the other phone. Was that you?"

"It was," Kim admitted, still cross. "She said on no account were you to be disturbed, so I respected your wishes. Of course had I been Miss Eve Mellors," she added, without quite knowing why she was being so rash, "I gather I'd have been put through *straight* away, board meeting or no."

"Mi-a-ow !" He regarded her with amusement rather than anger as she expected, shaking his head at her. "You *are* a little pussy, aren't you? And actually you're wrong about Eve — no one interrupts board meetings, and why did you hang up? You could have left a message with Miss Norton."

"Because she didn't seem to grasp the fact that I was

trying to tell her something important," Kim snapped, her expression still furious after his taunt about being catty.

"If you had the boys with you why Pannet know, instead of putting us both to all that worry and trouble? I haven't even been to work this morning, but fortunately Mr. Daley was very understanding."

His smile did nothing to placate her and he flicked an eloquent gaze over her face. "I can imagine," he commented, "George knows what he's up to."

She flushed, only partly in anger. "You could have let us know," she insisted, still trying to fix the blame firmly on him.

She should have known from his expression that he was prepared for that one and she lowered her gaze hastily when it showed in his eyes. "You *did* say that you and Mrs. Pannet had been out all morning, didn't you?" he asked quietly, and she nodded. "Then how do you suggest I should have let Mrs. Pannet or you know, since there was no reply to any of my telephone calls?"

"I — I hadn't thought of that," Kim confessed, and felt even smaller as she tried to shrink from sight behind the hedge.

"I'm sorry you were put to a lot of trouble, but rest assured that those two little monsters won't get away with it altogether."

She raised her eyes then, apprehension replacing anger. "You — you won't be too hard on them?" She might have been begging on her own behalf, and his eyes gleamed with something she found disturbing.

"Discipline is good for their souls," he told her, frowning sternly, "if not for their sit-upons."

"Oh no !" She was pleading now, hating to think of Ronnie and little Lee being spanked for running away from something they obviously felt very deeply about, which was

Eve Mellors, if Mrs. Pannet was to be believed.

"Oh yes ! " he argued adamantly. "They've put a lot of people to a lot of trouble and they deserve what's coming to them."

"But they're only babies," she protested.

"Ronnie is six," he reminded her wryly, "and capable of taking his brother into Woodmouth on the bus. If one of the secretaries hadn't spotted them from a window they'd probably be signed on the crew of a merchant ship by now. Oh no, Ronnie knows what he's up to, and *he* wouldn't take kindly to hearing himself called a baby, he'd sooner have a walloping."

"You're a brute," Kim told him, almost tearful herself, "an unfeeling, uncaring brute, and you're the most unnatural father ever !"

"That's possible," he agreed, surprisingly. "Because I'm *not* their father, I'm their uncle, and I'm only in temporary charge, thank God!"

He had turned on his heel and gone back into the house, slamming the door loudly behind him, while Kim still stood by the hedge, her eyes wide, her lips parted in speechless surprise.

CHAPTER III

"IF only *someone* had told me," Kim complained to George that same afternoon, "I needn't have made such a fool of myself, as it was I played straight into his hands. Ooh, I hate that man!"

"It never occurred to me that you didn't know," George told her, smiling at the angry face she wore. "But don't worry about it, darling. I'm sure James doesn't think you made a fool of yourself."

"I don't care what he thinks," Kim retorted, contradicting herself and unaware of it.

"Well, I'm sure he's grateful to you," George insisted, trying to placate her. "After all, you went to a lot of trouble trying to track down his little monsters, didn't you?"

"They're not little monsters," Kim objected, forgetting her own reference to them as such after their first encounter. "They're nice little boys, and I feel sorry for them."

"Because they're with James?" he asked, and Kim shrugged.

"That and the fact that they've been abandoned to his obviously couldn't care less treatment, poor mites."

"I suppose it's a bit tough on them with their parents abroad all this time," George admitted, "but they're really quite happy with James, you know, and he's very fond of them, despite the fact that he always refers to them as monsters. That's where I got the idea," he added with a grin.

"I suppose he is fond of them," Kim admitted reluctantly, "in his own way."

"You can bet he is if he has them there," George averred. "Having them can't do much for his social life. I wouldn't

even dare think about it in his place, and Eve hates the sight of them."

"From what I gathered from Mrs. Pannet, the housekeeper," Kim told him, "the children don't like *her* either. He should have had more sense than to have them there in the circumstances."

"Maybe," George admitted. He was sitting on the edge of her desk and he leaned across, lifting her chin with one finger. "I think you need cheering up after your morning's gloom," he told her, "so I propose taking you to the Casino tonight. O.K.?"

"Now don't argue with your boss," he interrupted. "Put on your glad rags and I'll pick you up about seven, O.K.?"

"O.K.," Kim agreed with a smile. "I was going to say I'd love to come, but you didn't give me time."

"I didn't want to give you time to refuse," George admitted. "I want to show the natives of Woodmouth that I haven't lost my touch. It's ages since I took a beautiful woman to dinner and they might suspect I've retired."

Kim laughed, entering into the spirit of the thing. With George it was so easy, he was an unfailing tonic to her ego and her morale. "How long is ages?" she asked, and he made a great show of considering his answer.

"Oh, it must be quite a month," he admitted at last. "I've been knee-deep in crime and it's time I had a break."

"As long as you don't forget I'm a working girl," she told him, "and I have to be up bright and early in the morning."

"Oh, not to worry," he assured her airily. "I'll square it with your boss if you're late."

Aunt Bess was quite excited about Kim's date with George and she fussed around all the time she was getting ready, chattering happily and offering advice as if it was

Kim's first date. Kim made no objection but merely smiled her understanding. Aunt Bess and Uncle John had married somewhat late in life and they had never had any family, although they would have loved one. Her aunt, she suspected, was enjoying the idea of having a make-believe daughter she could fuss over.

"You look lovely, Kim dear," she told her as she gazed at Kim's reflection in the long mirror. "That *is* such a pretty dress."

It was indeed a pretty dress, and Kim always felt good in it, for the soft material clung and flattered and the vivid blue lent even more colour to her eyes. "It's my favourite one," she admitted, "and I've never worn it since I've been here, so no one will recognise it isn't new."

"I'm sure Mr. Daley will be delighted with you," her aunt said, and Kim laughed, following her downstairs.

"I suspect George would be delighted with anything feminine as long as it's fairly presentable."

"But you *do* look lovely, dear," Aunt Bess insisted, "and I think it's quite exciting that such an important man as Mr. Daley shows such interest in you. It could be very lucky for you."

"Lucky?" Kim thought she followed the train of thought, but with Aunt Bess it was not always easy. Certainly, despite a great many good points, she was something of a snob and was undoubtedly impressed with the fact that a man as well-known as George had asked her niece out for the evening.

"Well, dear," Aunt Bess looked coy, her round face smiling hopefully, "Mr. Daley *is* a very famous man and a very wealthy one. Any girl could do worse."

"Oh, Aunt Bess !" Kim laughed, hugging her aunt affectionately, and Aunt Bess looked somewhat disappointed at her reaction. "George isn't the marrying kind," Kim told

her, "and I'm not sure I am either. I have a good job and I enjoy it, so don't try to make more out of it than it is, please."

"I'm not, dear," her aunt protested, "but you could do a great deal worse than Mr. Daley, you know, and he must like you or he wouldn't have asked you out."

Kim laughed again, shaking her head. "Of course he likes me, darling, but only because I'm fairly presentable, as I say, and George likes being seen with pretty women — he admits as much."

"Mmm, well, we'll see." Aunt Bess was not to be so easily deterred.

George arrived, right on time, and his eyes widened in exaggerated surprise when he saw her. "You look absolutely gorgeous," he told her, "and I shall probably fall head over heels in love with you before the night's out, I warn you."

Aunt Bess looked at Kim with an I-told-you-so arch to her brows, and Kim's laugh was as much for that as for George's extravagant warning. "I doubt it," she told him, "but thank you all the same."

George drove a small but powerful car that gave barely enough room for two side by side, especially when one of them was driving, and Kim found the intimacy of the situation rather intriguing. He was wearing evening dress and looked, if anything, even more poetic than usual, for there were narrow frills edging the front of his shirt that made him look somehow Victorian and rather romantic. His fair hair, looking longer than ever where it curled on to his collar, added to the illusion, and Kim smiled to herself as she remembered the satisfied gleam in Aunt Bess's eyes when she saw him.

"O.K.?" He flicked her a glance as they turned onto the main Woodmouth road, his sleeve brushing her arm as he

changed gear, the smile round his mouth, slow and intimate. George, she thought, was at his most dangerously charming.

She nodded her head. "Fine, thanks. I've never been to Woodmouth, what's it like?"

"Seaside," he answered with a wry grin, "need I say more." He flicked her another glance. "No," he added with a laugh, "that's not strictly fair. It's quite a decent town and very go-ahead, though it's not the kind of place I'd like to live in. It's pretty prosperous too, thanks to hordes of visitors every season and also to Fleming Enterprises."

Kim frowned, remembering her surprise when she had tried to contact James Fleming. "I hope I don't appear too ignorant," she said, "but what *are* Fleming Enterprises? I have to admit I've never heard of them."

George laughed, obviously not sharing her ignorance. "It's quite possible you haven't heard of them," he told her. "So few people bother to see who the publisher of a book is, when they read one. Actually they're a subsidiary of one of the big London firms, mainly concerned with publishing, hence my knowledge of them."

"Oh, I see."

He laughed. "I hope that means you've never read the publisher's name on my books," he told her, "and not that you've never read any of my books, because otherwise I shall abandon you by the roadside without further ado."

"Of course I've read them," Kim laughed, "but I'd no idea James Fleming was connected with you professionally."

"I suppose you could say he was," he allowed. "They opened this massive place down here just over a year ago, James, his brother Paul, and a cousin. They only keep an eye on the running of it, I believe, attend board meetings

and such and still keep it very much a Fleming concern."

"And the children —"

George nodded. "They're Paul Fleming's brood. He and Alice, his wife, are in Australia for several months, to do with opening a new branch over there, I believe."

Kim would have asked whether James Fleming was, or ever had been, married, but she was afraid George might misinterpret her interest, so she kept quiet and gave her attention to the road they were travelling.

There was still quite a bit of daylight left and the sun looked fatly brassy and low in the sky, the sea a rippling sheet of gold and still dotted with bathers cooling off after the heat of the day. Woodmouth was in a much higher position than Woodsea, built on the solid grey rock, with access to its beach via a series of steep paths and steps. The road between the two places started out along the coastline and fairly close to the cliffs, but veered inland as it neared the town.

"It looks quite nice," Kim remarked, and George nodded smiling agreement.

"It's not too bad at all," he admitted. "You must get Fay to bring you here shopping one time. It's a good shopping centre, so I've been told."

"Then I must come," Kim agreed. "I love shops, the more the merrier."

"Ah !" he said dramatically, "I knew it! Beautiful women are always extravagant. I shall have to give you a rise in salary before I turn you loose with Fay."

"There's no need," Kim protested laughingly. "I'm getting a very good salary now, considering all things."

"You wait until you've been shopping with Fay," he warned her darkly, "you'll soon change your mind."

The shops were all closed at this time of night, but the brightly-lit windows and inviting displays whetted Kim's

appetite. "I must come," she said. "Perhaps on Saturday, it looks very inviting."

"I'll tell Fay," he grinned, flicking a knowing glance at her. "Tonight we're driving right through it to the Casino on the other side of town."

"Is it?" Kim asked. "A casino, I mean."

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not, it was a bit of wishful thinking on the part of the owners, but the city fathers were a little wary of going that far just yet. Are you a gambler?"

"On my salary?" She laughed softly at his grimace of reproach. "No, I'm not, as it happens, it's a method of giving away money that's never really appealed to me, I'm afraid."

"Wise girl."

"Am I? I don't know, maybe I'm just cautious, I've never been sufficiently well off to throw my money around as if it doesn't matter."

He grinned at her over one shoulder, his expression, as it often was, at variance with his romantic appearance. "You should marry a rich husband," he told her, and Kim could do nothing about the flush that coloured her cheeks when she remembered Aunt Bess's suggestion on that score.

"I think not," she said. "Not for the reason you mean, anyway."

He chuckled. "Only for love, eh?" he teased. "How very romantic, darling. I adore you when you're all sweet and old-fashioned, it's so feminine."

"George —" She started to protest, but he must have guessed it and he took one hand from the steering wheel and reached for hers.

"I'm only teasing you, darling." He raised her fingers briefly to his lips and kissed them gently. "I presume, even if you don't like gambling, that you like eating?" Kim

noded, smiling her forgiveness. "Good, because the food at the Casino is rather good, in fact it's a first-class club altogether. There's usually a good cabaret and there's plenty of room to dance. It's as good as most places you'll find in London and it has the advantage of out-of-London prices."

It was obvious from the attention he received that George was a fairly frequent visitor and a valued one, and the head waiter himself showed them to a table, shrewd eyes appraising Kim in the light of experience.

"Nice to see you again. Mr. Daley," George was informed, an arched brow giving discreet approval of his taste.

"I gather you often come here," Kim said wryly, after they were seated.

"Fairly often," George admitted with a grin. "Do you like it?"

"Very nice," Kim allowed. "I'll let you have my final verdict when we've eaten - I'm starving !"

The food, when it came, was excellent, and Kim smiled over the rim of her wine glass at George, her eyes softly shining in the light of the table-lamp. "You look happy," George told her, touching the fingers of her free hand, "and very, very lovely. I told you I should probably fall in love with you before the night was out, and I think I shall."

Kim laughed softly, feeling pleasantly relaxed and mildly flirtatious. "After only two weeks?" she teased. "It's unlikely, George, very unlikely."

"I don't see why," George argued. "For one thing it's more than two weeks since you came, and for another we spend a lot of time together, and that's what does it. Proximity, darling. that's the secret. Put two people together often enough and they're bound to fall in love; it's the nature of things."

"It certainly isn't," Kim denied, laughing at his frown. "If that was the case, you'd have people falling in love with each other willy-nilly. Take the average office, for instance — a large office I mean; if you were right it would mean that every man in the office would fall in love with every woman and *vice versa*, and they have just as much — propinquity as we have."

"No, no, no." He shook his head firmly. "You've got it all wrong, darling, and anyway I'm not sure that phrase is grammatically correct. The point of it all is that the chemistry has to be right for it to work; given that *and* constantly being together it's bound to happen."

"Unless," Kim suggested with a sly smile, "they get sick of the sight of one another."

"Oh, you unromantic little creature!" he told her. "Don't you want me to fall in love with you?"

"I'd be very flattered if I thought you meant it," she told him, uneasily remembering Aunt Bess again. "You're quite the nicest boss I've ever had, George."

He kissed her finger tips briefly. "Flatterer," he said.

They had just left their table to dance when she saw his brows indicate surprise. He was looking over her shoulder as they went on to the floor, half-smiling to himself, and Kim looked at him curiously.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He pulled her closer in his arms and shook his head. "Nothing's wrong," he told her, "but James and Eve are here too. I just spotted them."

"It's quite a popular place," Kim remarked. "Do they come here often?"

"Eve and James? Fairly often, I think. Eve likes the bright lights, though I suspect James isn't very keen."

"But he does as he's told?" Kim suggested, and George arched a brow at her tone.

"I don't imagine so, darling," he told her. "Our James has a mind of his own. It's Eve who watches her step in that particular field."

"Oh, I see."

"I doubt if you do," George denied. "According to my fair sister, it seems that cousin Eve has deep laid plans for becoming Mrs. James Fleming "

"Only according to Fay?" Kim asked. "Haven't you speculated on it too?"

"Mmm," he admitted. "I have to admit I have noticed signs in that direction, but James is far too wary a bachelor to be caught very easily."

If Kim had any opinion to voice in the matter, she felt it was a little early for her to express it, and she merely smiled and went on dancing as if nothing else interested her at the moment.

"Aren't you interested in the big romance?" George asked.

Kim shook her head. "Not very," she said. "And unless I'm very much mistaken, James Fleming isn't the only wary bachelor round here." He pulled a face and she laughed, her eyes glistening mischief at him as he held her close enough to make her tip back her head to look at him.

"That was unkind, darling," he reproached her. "You know I'm only waiting for the right girl to come along and I'll be trotting up the aisle as meekly as any lamb." His eyes searched her face with a warm intimacy that set her pulse racing. "I *could* have found her," he added softly.

She shook her head, smiling at his expression and wishing Aunt Bess's words did not keep coming back to her with such embarrassing frequency. "I don't think so, George, not yet."

He tightened his hold on her and held her so that his

face rested against her hair, close to her ear, his voice deep and persuasive, and slightly muffled. "If you don't stop looking at me with those big, shiny eyes I shall kiss you here and now," he warned. "Then I'll *have* to marry you, won't I?"

"Will you?" She tried to move her head, but had to content herself with speaking against his jacket. "Don't tell me you've never kissed a girl while you've been dancing with her, George. I just won't believe it, not of you."

"Hard-hearted siren," he sighed against her ear. "I'm feeling all romancy and daring, so don't tempt me. Let's go outside," he added suddenly, "it's *very* atmospheric out there."

Kim shook her head as well as she was able. "No," she laughed, "we'll keep right on dancing."

"It's lovely outside." He raised his head and looked down at her, his eyes darkly blue and gleaming softly. "Come on," he coaxed, "I promise I'll be good."

Kim hesitated briefly, then nodded. "All right," she agreed, "since you promise to behave, it is rather warm in here now."

Outside it was indeed lovely. There was a new moon and it leaned like a thin sliver of silver in a sky that glittered with stars, and looked too beautiful to be real. There was a wide strip of garden between the building and the edge of the cliff and it smelled warm and woody from the shrubs that bordered it, a light breeze rustling among their leaves like a whisper.

"The sea looks an awful long way off from here," Kim remarked as they walked down the centre path towards the cliff, and George nodded.

"It's a big drop from the cliff edge here, that's why the building's set well back," he explained, and laughed. "I used this spot for a book once," he added. "A body hurled

over the cliff to the beach below — very dramatic."

Kim shuddered. "What a ghastly idea," she complained, "and on such a lovely night too !"

He put an arm round her and hugged her tightly to him, kissing her forehead lightly, looking far more suited to a love story than a gruesome crime writer. George, Kim thought, was very definitely deceptive as far as appearances went. "I'm sorry, darling," he told her, "it's far more of a moonlight and roses setting, isn't it?"

"Definitely," she agreed. "Bodies over cliffs are definitely out of character."

"And I said I felt all romancy," he remembered, laughing softly as he halted them in the shadow of a headily scented mock orange.

"George —" she had only time to begin her protest before his mouth came down over hers, gently but firmly, and held her for so long that she felt herself breathless when at last he released her. "George — George, you promised to — to behave yourself if we came outside, remember?"

"So I did," he laughed. "That's what comes of writing fiction, darling, no respect for the truth."

"George —" Again he silenced her, but this time she managed to move her head and pushed at him vainly.

"Sssh !" He put a finger to her lips, his head half-turned towards the brightly lit building behind him. "Someone's coming."

"But we —"

"Shush," he warned again, his head still turned. "Perhaps they'll go away."

"For heaven's sake, George, stop acting as if we're —" He was looking at her, one brow raised, a grin on his face that had a mischievous look in the moonlight.

"Well, aren't we?" he asked softly, and a moment later frowned as voices reached them from not too far away.

"Oh bother it, they're coming this way."

"Well, it doesn't matter, does it?" Kim asked, a little impatiently. "There's plenty of garden, after all."

He looked down at her, his eyes looking incredibly dark in the silvery light, and she met his gaze uneasily. "I don't want company — except you," he told her, and bent his head to kiss her again.

It was partly the fact that she knew someone else was embarrassingly near and partly because she felt George was having things too much his own way that made her protest, and she pushed against him with both hands until she could free her mouth. "George, please don't!"

"Kim?" The voice was only too familiar and far closer than she had expected and it took Kim only a second to recognise the tall, unmistakable figure of James Fleming, taller by far than his blonde companion, although she was several inches taller than Kim.

The light grey eyes were distinguishable even in this uncertain light, and they settled unerringly on Kim, half-hidden by the blossom tree and by George. "Hello, James." It was George who answered him, Kim being too embarrassed still at being recognised.

The light eyes still stayed on Kim and she felt bound to speak to him, even if only to free herself of his interest. "Hello," she murmured.

"Having fun?" The implication was obvious, and Kim flushed at it, glaring at the tall shadowy figure.

"I—I—" She got no further, for George took over the conversation again, with an aplomb that told of long practice.

"We *were* having fun," he told James, his intention obvious, so that Kim felt she could have curled up on the spot, and hated the way he challenged James to stay any longer.

"I see." Something still seemed to hold him, when it would have been far more prudent to have left. "Kim, are you — all right?"

"Of course she's all right," George told him impatiently, and support came inevitably from his cousin, who had watched so far with a rather sneering smile on her face that pitied Kim's apparent inability to cope with the situation.

"For heaven's sake, darling," she told James, "surely Miss Anders is capable of handling George — after all, she works for him."

It was a statement meant to remind Kim of her place and the brittle voice drawled insolently, as she kept one hand curled possessively round James Fleming's arm. Kim, who until now had only judged her from a distance, disliked her intensely, and not just for her malice.

"I don't think you've met, have you?" George asked blithely. "Despite you flitting in and out, Eve. This is Kim Anders, my very delightful secretary and girl Friday. Kim darling, my cousin, Eve Mellors."

Kim took the long slim hand, proffered almost reluctantly it seemed, and studied the other girl as well as she was able in the conditions. There was a cool hardness about the hand-clasp as there was about the voice, and she knew that she was being studied in her turn with eyes that were far from friendly.

"What do you think of Woodmouth's night life?" James asked, and Kim shook her head.

"I don't really know yet," she told him. "We've had dinner here and danced a little, it seems very nice."

The opinion obviously amused Eve Mellors and her thin mouth curled into a smile of disdain. "I don't suppose Miss Anders is really much of a judge of night life, darling," she told him. "After all, I don't imagine a secretary's salary runs to night club prices very often, does it, Miss Anders?"

Unless," she added before Kim could answer, "she goes in company with her boss, of course."

"Not very often, Miss Mellors." Kim had the feeling that she had forestalled some remark from James Fleming, but she had no desire to hear the sympathy she saw in his eyes put into words. She swallowed hard,, feeling her throat constricted as she realised how accurate George's estimation of his cousin's character had been.

"Puss, puss!" George's voice was sharp despite the laugh that accompanied the jibe. "Your claws are showing, Eve darling."

"Nonsense," Eve Mellors retorted, obviously resenting the jibe. "I merely stated an obvious fact and Miss Anders agreed with me. There's a lot involved in going out to places like this, you know. Being a man you wouldn't realise. If you want to go night-clubbing with your employees, George, you should pay them more. Suitable clothes can be very expensive, you know." A cool gaze surveyed Kim's simple dress meaningly and Kim flushed, glad of the semi-darkness to hide her colour.

"Well, that dress certainly looks well enough," James remarked quietly. "I noticed you inside earlier on, Kim, and that shade of blue is definitely very flattering."

"Thank you." Kim was undecided who was most surprised by the compliment, herself or George; either way it was George who answered.

"Kim always looks gorgeous," he claimed extravagantly, and kissed her ear, "that's why I'm so potty about her, isn't it, darling?"

Kim merely lowered her lashes over her eyes and smiled uneasily, wishing he need not sound so proprietorial. "I think we'd better be going," James suggested. "We did promise to call in on the Maceys, Eve, if you remember. Shall we go?"

"Of course, James, if you're ready." She complied so willingly and with a meekness so out of character that Kim was reminded of George's statement earlier, that Eve had set her heart on being Mrs. James Fleming. Only a woman determined to win at any cost would be prepared to efface her normal character as Eve Mellors did, and her compliance, in Kim's eyes, gave her an odd sort of pathos.

Kim watched them walk off into the lights, thoughtfully. "See what I mean about little Evie having to watch her p's and q's?" George remarked with a grin. "She'll hate you for that little interlude, darling."

"I hope not," Kim mused, not altogether sure whether she minded or not how Eve Mellors felt about her.

George eyed her silently for a moment. "I didn't know you were on quite such chatty terms with James that he called you Kim," he said at last, and Kim shrugged.

"Neither did I," she retorted. "He's always very formally called me Miss Anders before."

"Hmm." George shook his head. "That's another score against you on Eve's card," he told her.

"Well, your cousin has no reason to worry about me," Kim told him shortly. "Although she seems to have made up her mind to dislike me from the word go."

"Naturally. You're a very pretty girl and therefore come under the heading of competition."

"That," Kim told him firmly, glad of the dim light to hide her colour, "is something she has absolutely no need to even think about."

"You go on feeling as sure as that about it," George encouraged, "and both Eve and I will be quite happy." He drew her back into his arms. "Which," she added softly, "brings me back to more important matters."

It was quite late when George brought her home and Kim wondered how much speculating Aunt Bess would be do-

ing as she listened for her arrival. "I shall be too sleepy for work tomorrow," she told George, her voice kept to barely above a whisper because they were standing in the porch and she did not want them to be overheard.

"Not to worry," George told her, "I'll have a word with your boss."

Kim glanced at her watch. "Just the same I'd better go if I want to get to bed before breakfast time," she told him, "it's after one."

He put his hands either side of her head, against the brick wall of the porch, standing so close to her she could feel the warmth of his breath on her cheeks. He looked as romantic as ever in the dim light and she wondered if she ever would fall in love with him and make Aunt Bess's wish come true.

"I'm sorry you caught some of Eve's venom," he told her. "I warned you what she was like, now you know."

"Now I know," Kim agreed wryly. "But if you and Fay dislike her so much why do you have her to stay with you?"

He sighed, deeply and dramatically. "It's Hobson's choice, darling. Our granddaddy, bless his old heart, left the house to all three of us, Eve, Fay and me, the idea being that it should be sold and the money divided. I decided that instead of selling it I'd like to live in it. I always liked the old place and it's an ideal spot for me to work. Fay likes it too and we offered to buy Eve's share from her. The only snag was that when she heard James was moving down here with the new offices, she decided to keep her share in it too. So whenever she's down here keeping an eye on James, we have to put up with her, or sell Linwood, and I don't want to do that. I'm a stubborn devil when it suits me."

Kim laughed softly. "I can imagine," she told him, "but it does seem a shame. You and Fay would have been so

much happier on your own."

"Much," he agreed, "but short of marrying Eve off to poor old James, I don't see what we can do about it."

"Maybe 'poor old James' wouldn't mind too much," Kim speculated. "He seemed to have the situation firmly under control, and I imagine he usually has — in his own interests."

"Oh, it's all right now," George allowed, "but marriage well —" He shook his head, a frown between his brows. "No-o, I wouldn't wish cousin Evie on to my worst enemy, and James isn't that." He leaned nearer still, his voice dropping into a lower register. "But never mind James and his problems," he told her, "let's talk about you." He kissed her lightly on her mouth. "You know I could fall madly in love with you, Kimball Anders, do you realise that?"

"If you say so," Kim smiled, her eyes bright and teasing. "But I'd like to know how often you've said that before. Using the appropriate name, of course," she added hastily, and laughed softly at his indignant expression.

"Pussy !" he scolded softly, and pulled her into his arms, his mouth hard and demanding so that Kim stirred in protest thinking, completely irrelevantly, of a pair of light grey eyes looking at her in sympathy.

CHAPTER IV

KIM enjoyed her work with George and it was far less demanding than any job she had had before. There was a happy-go-lucky atmosphere in the house when there was only Fay and George there, and most days Kim took her mid-morning coffee with them.

She had become good friends with Fay and never ceased to wonder at the difference in temperament between George and his placid, down-to-earth sister. His almost bohemian way of life must have been quite maddening to Fay at times, and yet she never or very seldom lost patience with him.

Only twice had Eve Mellors been there when Kim had been in for coffee and she had made it very plain each time that she considered such familiarity undesirable. Since it was her house as much as her two cousins', Kim felt rather uncomfortable about it, but George would not hear of any other arrangement.

"Don't worry about it," he told her, dismissing her protests with an airy hand. "If Fay and I ask you to have coffee with us, Eve has no say in the matter. She can lump it if she doesn't like it." The take-it-or-leave-it attitude was typical of George and could scarcely have affected him as much as it did Kim, but she saw nothing for it but to comply with his wishes.

"And she *doesn't* like it," Kim told him. "After all, George, it is her house as well and if she objects to the hired help getting above their station, I suppose she's entitled to say so."

"Not in my hearing she isn't," George insisted stub-

bornly. "And stop referring to yourself as the hired help or I'll make you marry me just to teach you *and* Eve a lesson ! I like having my own way and I won't be crossed by a couple of females even if one of them is my girl-friend."

"Your —" Kim began, smiling in spite of herself.

"My girl-friend," he insisted. "Just because you pound a typewriter on my behalf it doesn't alter anything You are, whether you like it or not, Kim, so there."

"You *are* stubborn," Kim laughed. George was an un-failing tonic and she was laughing unrestrainedly when they went into the sitting-room for coffee. Her heart sank a moment later when she saw that not only Eve Mellors was there but James Fleming as well, and she would have turned back had it not been for George's fingers holding on to her arm relentlessly, making retreat impossible.

"Come on, you two," Fay called out as they came in. "We were just talking about the race next week."

George looked at his cousin and her companion and grinned amiably. "Quite a party, isn't it?" he said. "We only need a man for Fay and we could have our own orgy."

Kim felt an inane desire to giggle at the outrageous statement, but Eve glared at him balefully. "It isn't an orgy, George, no matter what ideas you may have."

"Me ?" He looked incredibly innocent, as only he could, and Kim did not miss the look of amusement in James Fleming's eyes. Apparently he did not share Eve's dislike of her cousin's joke.

"We were talking about the race," Fay insisted gently, handing coffee to Kim who sat beside George on the settee.

"Is it already ?" George asked. "When, for heaven's sake?"

"Next week," Fay informed him. "You know quite well it's always the second week in September, George."

"Ah, so I do," George agreed, and looked across at

James. "I suppose you're putting that roaring juggernaut of yours in again, James?"

"Of course," James nodded. "I wouldn't miss it for anything." He looked across at Kim, the grey eyes just friendly but nevertheless disconcerting enough to Kim to make her lower her own gaze. "Are you interested in boats, Kim?"

Kim shook her head uncertainly, conscious of Eve Mellors' eyes on her and wondering again why he should be using her christian name so easily. "I've never had a great deal to do with boats, I'm afraid," she confessed, "but I must admit I like to see sailing boats, especially on a sunny day. They look so beautiful and tranquil somehow."

"I don't mean sail-boats," he told her, "but motor-boats, very high speed racing boats."

Kim shook her head, more certainly this time. "Oh no, I know nothing about them at all, I'm afraid, though I've often thought it must be very exhilarating going at such speeds on the open sea."

"It's a wonderful sensation!" The light eyes gleamed almost fanatically when he thought of it, and Kim, chancing a look at him, wondered whether Eve Mellors shared his enthusiasm.

"You'll have to watch James doing his stuff next week," George told her with a grin, "it's quite exciting." He furrowed his brow for a moment in thought. "I have a vague idea," he mused, "that I've arranged to go to the Headland to watch. I usually do."

"Don't you race?" she asked, and George pulled a wry face while Fay and James made no secret of their amusement.

"Go on, laugh," he reproached his sister. "I'm not breaking my neck for five minutes' glory, not for anybody!"

"It's a sort of local Derby in a way," Fay explained for Kim's benefit. "Only very fast racing boats are used and

it's skill more than anything else that counts, so it can be very exciting. A lot of people from along the coast, Woodmouth, Dimsea and Paxeter, take part, but last year James beat them all — he was marvellous."

Kim looked at the tanned face, now looking slightly discomfited after Fay's unstinted praise. "You must have a very good boat to beat the locals," Kim told him, and he looked up at her, obviously puzzled.

"I'm not up against the locals," he told her, "*I am* a local. That's why we brought the new offices down here from London. It's my home ground, you might say."

"Oh, I see." She saw the curl of derision on Eve Mellors' thin lips and flushed. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't know much about you, Mr. Fleming, although we've been close neighbours for the last month or so." It was meant, in some oblique way, to put the blonde woman in her place, but she doubted if it would appear that way.

James himself made no comment, but she thought he sensed her intention, for there was an unholy gleam in his eyes when he looked at her. "I hope you'll be interested enough to witness my next five minutes' glory," he told her, quoting George. "I intend to win this year as well."

"Of course you will, darling," Eve Mellors drawled in her cool voice. "I'm putting all my money on you, so you'd better not let me down."

He acknowledged her confidence in him with a brief smile, then looked again at Kim. "You *will* watch, won't you?" he asked, as if it mattered, and Kim nodded almost without thinking, only too well aware of Eve Mellors' sharp eyes watching her with a malice that chilled her.

It was getting cooler now that September was already more than a week gone and the days seemed less bright and bold and more tranquil, although there was an oc-

casional sprightly wind off the sea that made it necessary to make frantic grabs at a skirt even slightly full.

Kim liked the hint of autumn in the air and preferred the soft warmth to the blazing heat that August had brought. She set out on the Sunday morning to walk along the sea wall to the cliffs and back, feeling too energetic to sit in the house and do some sewing jobs that should have been done long since.

Terry and Lee were in the front garden of the house next door when she started out and they called to her through the high hedge. Walking round to the gate, she found them both standing there with their customary air of pathos, eyes wide and soulful as they looked up at her. "You goin' out?" Lee asked, and Kim nodded.

"Just for a little walk," she agreed.

"Out," Terry said, even more soulful than her brother so that Kim felt suddenly and inevitably guilty as the two small faces peered at her through the bars of the gate.

"Aren't you going out somewhere? It's a lovely day. Where's your uncle? Perhaps he'll take you on to the beach if you ask him."

"Gone," Terry informed her, with an ever-increasing air of despondency, and Lee enlarged, though vaguely.

"He's gone in the boat."

"Oh, I see." She did see, she thought crossly, only too well. He was so intent on winning that wretched boat race that he had no time to take the children to the beach, even on such a lovely day as this. She bent down beside the gate, seeking to comfort them as best she could. "Well, maybe I'll take you for a walk one day soon, hmm? But we must ask your uncle first, so it can't be today, O.K.?"

The two faces brightened visibly and Lee had a shrewd gleam in his eye that she would not have expected in a four-year-old. "Where to?" he demanded.

"Oh, I don't know," she demurred, faced with an unanswerable question. "We'll decide that later." She had made the suggestion with only a vague idea of it ever being fact; it was meant to mollify them for the time being, but Lee, at least, seemed to have other ideas on that score.

She smiled in the face of Lee's unsatisfied frown and waved a hand to them as she went off along the sea wall, still with a feeling of guilt at the back of her mind. Although why she should have felt guilty she could not imagine, for if anyone did it should have been James Fleming, and she hoped those soulful eyes would upset his conscience when at last he decided to come home.

It was such a lovely day that she had ventured out in a sleeveless dress and she was quite warm enough, although there was a brisk wind blowing in off the water. It was a dress that suited her to perfection and she felt good in it, knowing it complimented her fair hair and also the light tan she had acquired in the weeks she had been there. Her long slim legs were as brown as her face and arms, and the whole made a very attractive picture as she walked, fairly briskly, along the sea wall.

She would find somewhere on the cliffs, she thought, and sit there for a while, watching the seagulls and the small white clouds drift in some mysterious ballet of their own above the sea. It was a scene she never tired of and thought she never would.

There were few people about, as was usual, so the sight of someone standing in one of the moored boats at the wooden pier drew her eye and she recognised James Fleming, her lips tightening almost involuntarily. With her condemnation of him as selfish still fresh in her mind she would like to have avoided him if she could, but she stubbornly refused to change her plans and so she carried on in the same direction.

He looked up as she approached and half smiled. "Hello, Kim."

It was very quiet, and the narrowness of the strip of sand between them made conversation quite easy without raising voices. "Good morning " She refused to be inveigled by his undoubted charm and by his persistent use of her first name, so she made no attempt to return the smile, merely pausing on the sea wall, looking down at him, disapproval plain in her face.

"Something wrong?" he asked, only mildly curious.

"I've just left Terry and Lee," she informed him. "They looked very forlorn."

"Oh?" He stood in the gently rocking boat, feet apart, hands on his hips, a slightly quizzical look in his eye as if he suspected her criticism.

"They wanted to know if I was going out," Kim went on. "I think they wanted to come with me, which was understandable; it's a lovely day."

"But you didn't bring them," he remarked, nodding his head approvingly. "Well, I don't blame you. They're very good at looking soulful when it pays them to, and I'm glad you were hard-hearted enough to resist."

"I was *not* hard-hearted," Kim denied indignantly, seeing herself on the wrong end of the argument. "It was because I didn't want to take them without your permission, though I might have known *you* wouldn't have bothered about them since you've left them behind this morning."

He grinned at her, obviously recognising the reason for her anger and completely unmoved by it. "Oh, I find it very easy to be hard-hearted," he told her, apparently seriously. "I'm the original wicked uncle didn't you know?"

"Do you *have* to be?" she retorted, rashly uncaring that he could accuse her of not minding her own business. "Couldn't you have brought them with you?"

He ran disrupting fingers through his hair and looked up at her, silent for a minute, which made her uneasy. "If I fetch them," he said slowly, "are you prepared to stand by to fish them out of the deep end every few minutes?"

He climbed nimbly out of the boat and covered the intervening strip of sand in a couple of long strides, stopping immediately below her, his head just above the top of the wall. She felt the colour flood slowly into her face and was glad of the dark glasses she wore to hide the expression in her eyes. They gave her a feeling of having something to hide behind, and James Fleming always made her feel so vulnerable, as if she was no more than a child herself and as much a trial to him as the other three. "You could —" she began, but he raised a hand and she stopped, made uneasy by something she saw in his expression.

"*You* could be a little more sociable," he told her. "It's a nice day, why don't you try? I'm sure you could be quite a nice girl if you weren't always so prickly."

"Why, you —" She was too taken aback to be as angry as she should have been and the glare she directed at him was made ineffectual by the dark glasses she wore.

"I suppose I'd be considered even more of a hard-hearted wicked uncle if I offered to take you for a flip in the boat, wouldn't I?" he suggested, ignoring the half-formed protest.

There was an unmistakable challenge in the light grey eyes and he surveyed her with what she felt amounted to insolence, although it made her pulse race uneasily when she met it. She stared at him, compelled to answer as she did, although she knew she should have dismissed the suggestion without hesitation.

"Where to?" she asked cautiously.

His smile told her she had replied as he expected her to and she despised herself for not turning away there and

then and walking off. "Does it matter?" he countered. Kim still hesitated. "Unless," he added softly, "you're scared, of course."

"I — I don't know."

His brows arched in comment on her indecision. "What are you afraid of?" he asked, his voice still quietly suggestive. "Me or the ocean?"

"Neither," Kim told him hastily, wishing she did not feel so fluttery and excited at the prospect and that he would stop looking at her the way he was.

"Then why not come?" he coaxed. He laughed then, a deep, challenging sound that stirred her uneasily because she hated the unspoken things it implied. "You'll be perfectly safe," he promised, "in every way."

She looked at him as steadily as her racing pulse allowed her to. "I was thinking of the children," she told him, her conscience stirring again briefly when she thought of those soulful little faces at the gate.

"Well, don't," he advised, adamant as ever. "I never allow them near the boat; it's much too dangerous, you should realise that, especially since you've appointed yourself their guardian angel."

"Are you *coming*?" he asked, cutting her short. The challenge he offered, plus some inexplicable urge to go with him, finally decided her, and she nodded her head. "Right, come on, then."

He lifted her down from the sea wall and when she stood on the sand in front of him, she realised just how tall he really was. It was the closest she had been to him yet and the smile he gave her did nothing to steady the rapid beat of her heart. For the first time she noticed tiny, fine lines at the corners of his eyes and the fact that, for a man, he had eyelashes that were ridiculously long and thick, making the

light grey irises more noticeable than ever. The white shirt he wore was open almost to the waist and she could see that his body was as tanned as his face, making him look far more like an outdoor man than a business executive.

He looked as if he realised she was studying him and it amused him, his smile wide as he extended a hand in invitation. "This way for the Skylark," he told her facetiously, and led the way to the wooden pier where his boat was moored. "Mind how you go." This last warning was issued as she stepped into the boat, hanging on grimly to his hands when it rocked.

There was no seat but room for two to stand side by side in the covered cockpit, shielded by the glass screen in front and a narrow piece at the side. She smelled the pungent smell of oil and petrol as she stood beside him, holding on to the bar in front of her, horribly nervous, though she would never have admitted it.

The engine purred into life, making the deck beneath her feet throb with life, then, as they left the pier, it roared like an animal released from restraint, sending the light craft skimming over the water almost without touching it, or so it seemed to Kim. The sensation was exhilarating and she stood with her head back, enjoying the sheer thrill of the speed, unaware at first that she was being watched.

She became conscious at last that he had turned his head and was looking at her, though she could only guess at the expression in his eyes because of the dark glasses he wore, but the hint of smile that touched his mouth gave her a clue to his satisfaction. Apparently she was reacting as he expected and it pleased him.

"Paxeter," he said suddenly, pointing to the shore. "Do you know it?"

"No, I haven't been there yet." She looked across at the ragged grey rocks and almost white sand, much lighter here

than at Woodsea. "It looks nice."

"I think so," he informed her with a smile, "it's where I was born."

"But you didn't open your new offices there?" she asked, and he shook his head. The noise of the engine meant that they had to shout above it, but he seemed not to mind and only occasionally glanced at the dials in front of him, speaking in short, staccato phrases.

"Not commercial enough. Woodmouth's bigger, more go-ahead, better situated altogether than Paxeter. Better, I mean, for that reason anyway. Paxeter's a sleepy little place really."

"Not the place for a bustling business tycoon," she suggested, a hint of criticism in her voice which he did not miss.

He laughed shortly. "Don't you approve of business tycoons, Kim?" he asked.

Kim shrugged, unwilling to be committed to such a sweeping generalisation. "I've met quite a few since I've been a secretary," she told him cautiously, "and they vary quite a lot. Some very nice, some quite the reverse."

His grin told her that he was in no doubt into which category she placed him, and she kept her eyes lowered not to meet his amusement head on and flush like a schoolgirl as she inevitably would. He glanced at his watch, suddenly, and slowed the boat down to a more reasonable speed. "Not bad," he opined, "but I could knock off another couple of minutes without the extra weight."

"Meaning me?" she asked.

"Meaning you," he agreed, and laughed at her indignation.

"If you didn't want the extra weight," she retorted, "why were you so insistent on my coming?"

His only reply was a swift glance and a smile before he

steered the boat further inshore and headed for what looked like a deserted beach. "Paxeter Cove," he told her as they came quite close inshore. "You should get George to bring you here some time, it's very romantic."

She flushed at the light-hearted jibe and glared at him reproachfully. "You seem to be labouring under a misapprehension," she informed him.

He turned the boat again, leaving the shore and heading out to sea again, glancing at his watch. "Am I?" he asked. "You forget, I know George."

Suddenly and without warning to her, he increased the speed of the boat and sent them hurtling back the way they had come, bouncing and flying over the water, the wind finding its way even round the protective screen and tossing Kim's hair into a tangle of soft curls, whipping a colour into her cheeks.

They went straight on past Woodsea and Woodmouth, the distance eaten up by the speed, until at last he slowed the engine again, looking at the time it had taken them. "Dimsea," he said, with obvious satisfaction, "and in good time, too." He spared a glance for her tousled head. "You look a bit windblown," he announced.

"Are you surprised?" She felt herself shy under his scrutiny, as always, and resented it as much as she always did.

He laughed softly, as if he suspected her feelings. "Not really," he admitted. "I only hope I've blown away some of your antagonism. Or do you still hate the sight of me?"

"I didn't say any such thing," Kim objected indignantly, "and I've never even suggested it."

"O.K., O.K., I'm sorry." He ran the boat alongside a wooden pier, very similar to the one they had left from, and cut the engine, jumping up on to the boards with the agility of long practice.

It was when he reached down his hands to help her ashore that she hesitated. "I should really get back," she told him. "I'm supposed to have gone for a walk and they might wonder where I've got to if I'm too long."

"You won't be too long," he assured her confidently. "And nobody'll start worrying about you yet. Come on," he added persuasively, his hands still reaching down to her, "I promise I'll get you back by lunch-time, Kim."

She hesitated only briefly, then nodded and put up her hands, hanging on tightly as he helped her out of the swaying boat. She walked with him along the pier and on to the sandy beach, a steadying hand on her arm as they went.

"Where are we going?" Kim asked, and he looked down at her with a grin, as if he speculated on her reaction.

"Smugglers' Walk?" he suggested, and laughed when she looked puzzled. "It's a natural gallery," he explained, "up there on the cliff. It's quite a climb, but the view is worth it, if you like that kind of thing."

"I do," Kim confessed, but nevertheless eyed the cliff that loomed above them with a certain apprehension. "Is it really a smugglers' walk? Were there smugglers here in the old days?"

"Oh, without doubt," he assured her, eyeing the tall, gaunt greyness of the cliff and the narrow steps that staggered all the way up the side of it to where a shelf of rock jutted away below the overhang above it. From down on the beach it looked breathtakingly narrow and very dangerous, and Kim wondered if he was just trying to frighten her or if he was serious about them going up there.

"*Can* you go up there?" she asked, trying not to sound as doubtful as she felt.

"Indeed you can." He grinned down at her again, his eyes gleaming wickedly, as if he suspected her nervousness all too easily. "The old smugglers are supposed to

have escaped up there, at one time, during the good old days, and held off the Excise men with a bombardment of rocks and boulders. It must have been very discouraging," he added with a laugh, obviously on the side of the law-breakers.

"And you no doubt would have cheered for the smugglers," she guessed, at which he nodded eagerly.

"Of course," he told her. "One of my ancestors, Abel Fleming, was among them, in fact he led them."

Kim eyed him for a moment meaningly. "Yes," she commented at last, "I can well imagine it, although I'd have expected a family with the name of Fleming to have originated from north of the border, not from this part of the world."

"Right again," he applauded, evidently undeterred by her implied criticism. "Angus Fleming, Abel's father, came south after the '45 rebellion, to marry a wealthy daughter of some local bigwig. They had four more sons besides Abel and lived happily ever after, by all accounts. The whole tribe had a gift for making money by fair means or foul, and we're still at it, though a bit more fairly than foully these days, I suppose."

"I see. You've a very — er — interesting history," Kim said, "I didn't realise how long you'd been here. Your family, I mean."

"No, I don't suppose you did. Most people hear our name, mine especially, and automatically assume we're Scots, when of course we aren't, not any more."

Kim eyed the towering face of the cliff once more. "Is it *really* safe to go up there?" she asked.

"Quite safe, except for children and old ladies," he replied solemnly, only his eyes showing laughter.

Kim decided she had no desire to be classed as either, which was obviously what a refusal would mean, in his

eyes, so she nodded agreement. There was a large notice displayed at the foot of the cliff steps, disclaiming the Council's responsibility for anyone climbing up to the gallery, a warning which set Kim's heart fluttering uneasily as they began the laborious climb upwards, so that she was grateful for the hand that was offered to help her.

"Take it slow and easy," her guide advised, "and you can -enjoy it without getting short of breath or breaking your neck."

There was only a flimsy handrail between them and a drop of well over a hundred feet to the sea below as they neared the top, and when James turned round 'to grin at her over one shoulder, she bit her lip anxiously.

"Be careful," she warned automatically, her grip on his hand tightening unconsciously.

"They do say," he told her, "that one Squire Murgles dropped his mistress into the sea from up here when she threatened to give him and his fellow villains away to the Excise men."

Kim shivered, flicking a brief glance downwards at the glitter of the sea below. It looked shiny and beautiful, but also cruel and relentless as it frothed and foamed against the rocks that sprawled like broken teeth across the sand and into the water. "How much further?" she asked.

"Nearly there." He sounded cheerful and completely unaware of her reaction, and not in the least out of breath. "Whew ! Here we are."

He literally hauled her up the last couple of steps and she found herself on a ledge which was, to her relief, much wider than it had appeared from below. It was perhaps seven or eight feet from the backing cliff to the edge of the jutting shelf and sat atop the solidity of nearly two hundred feet of rock, so there was little fear of it crumbling. The only threat as far as Kim could see, came from the over-

hang, which hung like a frown some ten feet above their heads.

"Well?" He was looking at her expectantly as they stood about three feet from the edge, looking out across the bright, sparkling expanse of the sea, and Kim found it difficult to put into words what she felt as she absorbed the sheer grandeur of it.

There was something almost unreal about the heady, heart-stopping vastness of the view. It was like being above the whole world, with no sight or sound to remind one of the mundane things of earth, just a seemingly endless expanse of glittering movement, with not even a ship in sight on the horizon to break the illusion and only the shrill voices of gulls and the slight moaning sound of the wind disturbing the quiet. Even the sound of the sea was dimmed by distance to a mere whispering sssh!

After the first few apprehensive seconds when she felt her stomach muscles tighten, Kim felt a lift in her heart, an inexplicable feeling of elation that sang through her veins like a song of triumph. She felt that if she just spread her arms wide, she could soar out over the bright water as easily as the gulls did. It was a dizzying sensation and one which she had never experienced before.

"It's wonderful!" she breathed, her eyes on the hazy glitter of the horizon. "I feel as if I could — as if I could fly

She moved, almost unconsciously, nearer the edge and breathed in the sheer magic of it, unaware of how far she had gone until she heard his gasp of warning and felt the sudden tightness of his hands about her waist, pulling her back against him. She made no move for a moment, aware of the fast, unsteady beat of his heart as well as her own.

"For God's sake be careful!" he whispered.

There was an unaccustomed harshness in his voice and

his fingers dug into her with bruising strength, a grip he made no attempt to ease even after she was safely away from the edge. The heady, blithe intoxication of the height still stirred in her and she turned her head, locking at him over one shoulder, her body relaxed against him, her eyes a dark and sparkling blue.

"What are you afraid of?" she asked, scarcely recognising the slightly husky, almost flirtatious voice as her own.

The light grey eyes were closer than they had ever been, the tiny lines at their corners exaggerated by the glitter of the sun on the sea, and he looked at her steadily for a moment, then swiftly and unexpectedly half turned her towards him. He still held her tight enough to hurt and his mouth came down hard over hers, setting her head spinning dizzily.

"James!" She began to regain her senses at last and twisted away from him, her eyes dark and uncertain, breathing heavily as she leaned against the supporting rock, well away from that intoxicating view*.

For a moment or two he looked at her, his breathing as erratic as her own, his dark hair dishevelled from the climb and the unceasing wind off the sea, and there was something unnerving in the way he regarded her. Then suddenly, it was as if some spell had been broken and he laughed, a deep, disturbing sound that held a hint of his usual mockery.

"That's quite a view," he teased. "I knew it was heady up here in the clouds, but I never realised *quite* how potent it was."

CHAPTER V

KIM had to admit that she had quite forgotten the promise she had made to the Fleming children, that she would take them out one day. She had promised only Terry and Lee, but Ronnie would have been informed of the prospective outing by the other two and children have very long memories, something Kim was unaware of, in her innocence of the ways of children. Apart from anything else, she had had rather a lot on her mind lately, and felt she could be forgiven for letting it slip her mind.

It was Ronnie who reminded her that he was due back to school in a few days' time, and Kim realised that he wanted to make sure that he was not left out of things. "I haven't forgotten, Ronnie," she told him with a smile, when he mentioned it. "I may try and take you next Sunday, O.K.?"

"O.K.," Ronnie nodded his satisfaction.

What he omitted to do, if it ever entered his head, was to remind her that the following Sunday was also the day of the boat race, and when Kim spoke to James Fleming about their proposed outing, he eyed her askance for a moment, until she wondered what breach of etiquette she had been guilty of.

"Have you forgotten it's the day of the race?" he asked.

Kim blinked for a moment, then shook her head over her own forgetfulness. "*I had* forgotten," she confessed, "but it needn't make that much difference, need it? Surely the whole coast doesn't come to a standstill for a boat race, does it?"

He smiled wryly at her, suspecting sarcasm, and per-

haps an effort to belittle the importance of the event he set so much store by. When he hoped once more to reap what George termed his five minutes of glory.

"I'm afraid so," he told her. "Well, almost anyway. It's quite an event, you know, despite your low opinion. Besides," he added, before she could protest, "I thought you were interested enough to watch. You said you were."

• "I did," she agreed, "and I am to a certain extent, but I still don't see why I can't take the children out that day as well. I think Ronnie suspects he'll miss something, so he wants to go before he has to go back to school."

"You're probably right," he allowed with a grin. "He hates to miss anything."

"Anyway I'm sure they'd love to watch the race. Unless," Kim added hastily, "you'd rather not entrust them to me."

He grinned at that, obviously finding the prospect amusing. "It's more like a case of entrusting you to them," he informed her, "but if you're brave enough to volunteer, then I'll willingly let you take them and be grateful." He eyed her for a second, then arched a brow in query. "I rather thought George might be taking you to watch," he said, "but on your own head be it. I only hope you realise what you're taking on — they're a bit of a handful *en masse*, you know."

"I can manage them," Kim told him, with far more assurance than she felt, though he must not know that.

"Then I'll tell Mrs. Pannet she can breathe freely, for the afternoon," he told her with a grin. "I only hope you won't regret it."

"Of course I won't regret it," she retorted. "You always make them sound so much worse than they are, and I can't think why. I *like* them."

A grin suddenly spread across his face and he eyed her

wickedly. "I only hope George isn't expecting to have your exclusive company that afternoon," he told her. "I tremble to think what he'll say if he gets landed with the monsters. He's not exactly the fatherly type, is he?" The idea seemed to amuse him intensely and he laughed in a way that Kim could only describe as malicious. "Oh dear, poor old George!"

"I don't know that I'm seeing George," Kim told him, "and I'm certain he wouldn't mind if I do see him. Also," she added, unable to resist it, "if it comes to the point, you're not exactly the fatherly type either, are you?"

For a moment he regarded her in silent amusement, then shook his head. "If you say so," he agreed, "but I haven't done too badly up to now."

It was something she could not argue with, for despite her own accusations that he did not care for the children enough, they seemed to adore him and willingly complied with the rather bohemian existence he subjected them to.

Whether or not George was prepared to have the company of the three children as well as herself, she soon discovered, for she mentioned it to him that same afternoon. His expression, if not exactly dismayed, was not enthusiastic either.

"I thought you'd agreed to come with me," he told her.

"I hadn't," Kim argued with a wry smile, "for the simple reason that you didn't ask me."

He looked at her uncertainly. "I'm sure I did," he said. "I meant to, anyway, and I thought you knew that — are you sure I didn't mention it?"

Kim shook her head. "You mentioned that you thought you'd arranged to see the race from somewhere or other," she told him, "and that's the last I heard of it."

"Oh — well, I'm sorry I didn't make it plainer, but I quite thought you understood, of *course* I expected you to

come with me." He eyed her for a moment doubtfully. "Aren't you taking on rather a lot, my sweet? There are three of them, and after all you're not trained to cope with monsters, are you?"

"They're not monsters," Kim declared indignantly. "They're three small children who miss their parents, and James Fleming isn't exactly the ideal substitute. Of course I can cope with them. You're as bad as he is!"

George looked vaguely surprised at her vehemence and Kim thought how hopeless it was to expect a man to understand such matters. "I just thought —" he ventured, but Kim cut him short.

"I can manage perfectly well, George, so don't worry."

"I expect you can, my sweet," he told her, "and I'm not exactly worrying, but I would like to have had you to myself on Sunday afternoon. It seems such a waste to expend a beautiful girl and a Sunday afternoon on a crew of urchins, and I'm not sure that James didn't know what he was up to."

Sunday proved to be a bright hot day, ideal for the race, apparently, and Kim found herself quite looking forward to playing foster-mother for the afternoon, although there would, she realised, probably be snags she had not even dreamed of.

It had transpired that George had arranged to meet a group of friends, including his cousin Eve Mellors, at a small inn near the finishing point. The place was situated right on the top of a cliff and gave a magnificent view of quite a bit of the course, but there was almost no garden where Kim could take the children, so she had been obliged to refuse the invitation extended by a hopeful George.

"I'm bitterly disappointed," he told her, "but I suppose there's not much else for it, is there? What will you do?"

"Oh, don't you worry about us," Kim assured him, "we'll find somewhere round the bay to watch from."

George looked vaguely uneasy for a minute, then he took her hand and kissed her fingers. "I love you, my sweet, but I could wish that you weren't quite such a little dogooder."

The designation made Kim a little uneasy, and she wondered if James Fleming shared George's view of her motives. It seemed there was much to be done before the race actually started, and the three children, with their uncle, were on the doorstep of Summer House rather earlier than Kim expected them, but she refused to be put out and invited the children in to wait for her.

Ronnie and Lee looked unbelievably angelic in blue shorts and shirts, their tow-coloured heads brushed meticulously neat and their faces rosy from scrubbing. Obviously they had been well scrubbed and ordered to be on their very best behaviour, for they looked round-eyed and a little overawed as they sat down obediently on Aunt Bess's settee, with Terry between them, just as neat and clean.

"Now mind your manners and don't get running off on your own," their uncle warned them, towering over them as they sat meekly still, and three fair heads bobbed agreement.

"They'll be quite all right with Kim," Aunt Bess assured him with touching faith in her niece's ability. "She likes children."

"She must do," he retorted with a grin for Kim's flush of embarrassment. "Anyway — thanks for having them, Kim, and don't hesitate to tan any backsliders. You have my full permission."

"I shan't do any smacking at all," Kim told him indignantly. "I'm sure they'll be as good as gold, all of them."

He grinned, shaking his head over her confidence. "Have

it your way," he allowed, "but don't say I didn't warn you, that's all!"

The three children bade him a solemn good-bye a few minutes later and Kim was faced with them for the first time, entirely alone.

It was a responsibility that weighed rather more heavily than she had expected, but she could not let the children know that. They were all quite excited at the prospect of something new and Kim hoped she would prove capable of providing enough distractions to keep them amused.

There were quite a number of attractive little coves round the coast, several of them just round the cliffs from the bay, and, as she had never yet visited them herself either, Kim thought it a good idea to make the most of her chances.

Nearest, and therefore most accessible, was one just at the end of the bay, nearest George's house. There was plenty of room to walk around the end of the sheltering rocks and she carefully helped them down on to the sand from the sea wall. It shifted warmly under their feet and felt faintly damp, but the children loved it and squealed their delight at the sight of the sheltered little beach just round the corner.

The tide was out and there was quite a wide expanse of beach, sloping steeply down to the water. Backing the cove was the tall, grey wall of the cliff and smaller rocks scattered across the sand almost as far as the water.

The rocks offered exciting climbing ground, she realised, but she eyed them a little doubtfully at first. It would never do to hand the children back to their uncle with cuts and bruises, so she must be quite firm about climbing on the rocks. He would no doubt attribute anything that happened to them to her negligence and inexperience, and in view of her criticism of him in that direction, she could not afford to give him cause for complaint.

The sun had warmed the sand and made it comfortable enough seating without extra protection, so that Kim sat down quite happily with her back to one of the smoother rocks for support, glad of her sunglasses against the glare of the sun on the water.

Ronnie and Lee played innumerable and noisy games, getting shrilly impatient with Terry, so that eventually the little girl came and sat beside Kim and they built simple sand castles which Terry knocked down with squeals of glee as soon as they were finished.

The boys had been engaged for some time in some rather noisy game of pirates, over by the cliff face, and Kim had become so engrossed in placing decorative shells on the castles she and Terry had built that she lost track of the time. It was when she suddenly became aware of an unaccustomed quietness that she turned her head to look over her shoulder.

She had heard it said once that when children were quiet it was time to grow suspicious and start worrying, and it would, she thought, apply particularly to boys since their games were usually so much noisier.

"Ronnie ! Lee !" she called to them both across the wide sweep of sand and rock that formed their playground, but could see only one of them.

Only Ronnie stood by the foot of the cliff, peering into a crevice in the rock, but of Lee there was no sign, and she got hastily to her feet, with Terry wide-eyed beside her. Ronnie looked round as she approached, a half guilty, half apprehensive look on his face that did nothing to reassure Kim. Obviously something was amiss and he was reluctant for her to know about it, that was how she read it.

"Hello," he ventured when she came up.

There was still no sign of Lee. He could have been hiding behind one of the rocks, of course, waiting to jump out at

her when she went looking for him, and she fervently hoped he was.

"Lee!" she called out, not too sternly as yet, for he might only be playing with her, but no one answered, and Ronnie still had that guilty, hangdog air about him that worried her. She felt her stomach muscles contract coldly as she put a hand on Ronnie's shoulder and made him look at her. "Where's Lee?" she asked. "Where is he, Ronnie?"

"Oh, *he's* all right," Ronnie assured her with an uneasy grin. "He's gone after Captain Blood, he's the leader of the pirates, you know."

"Never mind Captain Blood," Kim told him, trying to sound firm and authoritative and wishing her voice would not tremble so much. "Where's your brother?"

"I told you —" Ronnie began, but stopped hastily when Kim shook the shoulder she held. The alarm she felt already showed in her eyes as she sought the truth from an obviously reluctant informant.

"I know what you told me," she interrupted, "but where has Lee gone?"

The small, round, sun-flushed face looked almost sulky and he lowered his eyes. "He went after Captain Blood," he repeated stubbornly.

told you to forget Captain Blood," Kim scolded, shaking him again. "Is Lee hiding behind one of the rocks?"

"Sort of." The answer was scarcely reassuring and she thought her own apprehension was beginning to worry Terry, who watched her wide-eyed, and with a finger doubtfully curled against her mouth.

Kim breathed deeply, all James Fleming's warnings about being able to cope coming to mind, but how could she have anticipated such obstinacy in a six-year-old? That was what bothered her as much as anything, she admitted

to herself, the way James would be able to crow over her if anything had happened to Lee. A situation like this, she supposed, was where expertise would tell. She should have been able to anticipate and counteract, and patience was obviously a very necessary requisite. Hers was already beginning to fray.

"Ronnie," she said slowly, "please tell me exactly where Lee went to and how long ago he went."

"Not long," Ronnie obliged, not very helpfully, that stubborn look still on his face.

Kim drew a deep breath, determinedly patient. "Where," she asked, "is Captain Blood hiding?"

He hesitated a moment longer, deciding whether she was on their side or not, Kim thought desperately, then he pointed a finger at the narrow crevice facing him, a crevice that split the rock from ground level to some eight or ten feet up, and nowhere wider than twelve inches across.

Kim stared at the crack, for it was no more, in the vastness of the cliff face, her eyes blank with disbelief. "But — but he can't be," she objected.

Ronnie shrugged, as if he had known all along she would not believe him. "That's where he is," he assured her, still apparently unconcerned about his brother's fate. "Lee went in after him."

"But it's too small." Kim bent low and peered into the crevice, starting nervously when she met the shiny gaze of a pair of eyes that looked rather less confident than Ronnie's. "Lee!"

"Hello." The voice sounded very small and a bit frightened and the eyes blinked as if tears were not far off. As far as Kim could tell, there appeared to be a small, hollowed-out space behind the crevice just big enough for Lee to stand in.

"Lee, how on earth did you get *in* there?" It was more

important, she realised a second later, how he was to get out of there, and Ronnie and Terry were both watching her hopefully, obviously expecting her to produce a solution, which at the moment refused to materialise.

"I – I can't get out," Lee informed her, his voice sounding flat and dead in the echoless acoustics of the rock. "I'm stuck, Kim, I want to get out." The tears were flowing in earnest now and Kim felt rather like crying herself as she peered in at the small face and its glistening eyes.

"Now don't you worry," she consoled him, suppressing her own panic with difficulty, "we'll have you out soon enough. Be a good boy and don't cry."

"I'm not — not crying," Lee assured her, snuffling earnestly between words. "Get me out, Kim, get me out!"

"We could pull him out head first," Ronnie suggested, with more enthusiasm than sympathy, and Kim frowned at him discouragingly.

"How did he get in there?" Kim asked, wondering if the way in could also be the way out, but Ronnie's reaction was discouraging.

"I don't know," he told her, "I s'pose he just crawled in."

Kim eyed him doubtfully and he refused to look at her. "Ronnie!" She took him by his arm and shook him hard. "You sent him in there, didn't you?"

Ronnie looked obstinate, his face set in an uncanny miniature of his uncle. "He went in after —"

"Stop it!" Kim shook him really hard this time and she saw from his expression that he at last realised she meant business.

"He only put his head in first," he told her, "then he sort of wriggled."

It was far less helpful than Kim had hoped for and she sighed. "Oh well, we'll just have to try and get him out

the same way." She tried to sound more cheerful than she felt, mostly for Terry's benefit, for the little, doll-like face was already crumpling into tears and one small fist was pushed into her mouth.

"Lee, Lee !" Her pathetic wail set Kim's teeth on edge and she knelt beside her on the sand, seeking to console her. "I'm frightened," Terry sobbed, "I wan' go home, I wan' go home !"

"We'll go home just as soon as we can get Lee out of there," Kim promised, wondering at her own optimism. How to get Lee out of the crevice was something that loomed before her like an insurmountable obstacle, and she wondered vaguely how James Fleming would deal with it. Thinking of their uncle reminded her of the race that must soon be starting, and she found that as a way to keep the other two children occupied while she strove to free their brother.

"Why don't you watch for the boats coming along?" she suggested hopefully. "You'll probably see your uncle if you watch carefully, won't you?"

"James is in the race," Ronnie agreed, suddenly and surprisingly co-operative. "Come on, Terry, let's go an' look for him." He was all too ready to forget his brother completely in the promised excitement and pulled his sister along to the nearest rocks to gain a better vantage point.

"Be careful on those rocks," Kim warned, terrified of further accidents. "I don't want to have to rescue you and Terry as well."

"We're O.K.," Ronnie assured her with unfailing optimism.

They found a place atop a conveniently flat-surfaced rock and Kim helped them up, settling them safely, at least for the time being.

"Now don't move until I come for you," she warned,

"and don't you let Terry fall off, Ronnie, or I shall be very cross."

It was only as she turned to go back to Lee imprisoned in the rock that she noticed something else that made the colour drain from her face and widened her eyes in horror. The strip of sand they had walked round to gain the cove was now completely covered with water and the tide was rapidly coming in up the steeply shelved beach to cut them off. It would need a miracle to make the cove high and dry, and she hastily looked for signs that the beach was not entirely covered at high tide.

It was something of a relief to find that the sand above the steepness of the incline was drier and not clingily damp as it was lower down. In the meantime nothing must panic the children, and Ronnie in particular, since his matter-of-fact acceptance of things would in all probability prove her own source of strength.

"Ronnie," she said, as calmly as she knew how, "if you see any boats out there you wave your hands, won't you? You and Terry, wave as hard as you like so that they see you, hmm?"

Ronnie nodded, only too willing to agree, and Kim prayed earnestly that someone, anyone at all would see them and realise their predicament. Anyone who knew the coast at all well would recognise how dangerous it was and would no doubt either come and fetch them or summon other help. In the meantime she had, somehow, to try and free Lee from the rock.

It was with some relief, when she got back to him, to find him more indignant at not being able to see the race with the other two than tearful about his imprisonment. "I wanted to see the race too," he protested when Kim came within earshot, and the effect of the protest in a flat little voice, coming from a slit in the rock, almost had her

laughing, although she realised that it was mostly near hysteria that prompted it.

"If you hadn't been such a silly and got yourself in there," she told him, "you could have seen the race. As it is you'll have to wait until I get you out." She peered in at him and once again felt the overwhelming sensation of hopelessness.

She put her hands inside the slit and Lee, rather touchingly, grasped it tight as if it gave him comfort, so that she felt more like crying than laughing. She was vaguely aware of the distant buzz of powerful engines in the still air, a sound that grew louder unbelievably fast.

She withdrew her hand from Lee's clasp and looked back over her shoulder at Ronnie and Terry still safely atop their rock perch. "Don't forget to wave if you see anyone," she called, and Ronnie nodded eagerly, getting to his feet the better to be seen. There was no time to scold him in to sitting down again, for the snarl of the racing engines was quite close now and he was dancing up and down in his excitement.

She turned back to Lee, no more sure how to free him than she had ever been, only aware that now the sounds from behind the rock were definitely sobs and she could not even get to him to console him.

"James is coming!" It was Ronnie's cry of triumph that turned her head and she stared for a moment in blank horror, knowing what that meant and guessing too how James Fleming would react when he saw his nephew standing on a rock waving to him.

"He — he's coming here?" she asked, and Ronnie nodded.

"He saw us waving, me and Terry, and he's coming over here. Here he comes, here he comes!"

His excitement knew no bounds, but to Kim the rapidly

nearing motor-boat seemed like the roaring juggernaut George had christened it. She could not see it as a vessel of rescue, only of vengeance, and she stared in dismay at the boat racing inshore towards them. "He was the first one to come," Ronnie informed her, delighted with the fact, while Kim could only nod dumbly, her eyes blank with dismay.

It was only seconds before the powerful engine was cut and the boat drawn alongside the rocks, for where the beach had shelved the water was now easily deep enough to take the boat and Kim sighed at the hindsight that made it so obvious. She should have known and recognised the reason for the sharp incline and for the dampness of the sand as they came round the rocks into the cove. It never had time to dry between tides.

She straightened up from beside Lee's prison as James Fleming came striding across the sand towards them, his frown as black as thunder, the roar of the other boats speeding past, echoing against the cliffs as if in mockery, and Kim quaked inwardly.

Ronnie and Terry, unaware of his anger or the cause of it, ran to meet him and he even managed a slow smile for them, which said much for his self-control, lifting little Terry into his arms, his gaze fixed darkly and accusingly on Kim.

"I'm — I'm sorry." She did not wait for him to speak first, but met his eyes, her own appealing, knowing how he must be feeling to hear those boats roaring past, most of them now almost out of earshot.

"What in the name of heaven," he demanded, "made you come here?"

"It looked nice, and quite safe, or I wouldn't have brought them." She was already attempting to justify herself, but she knew it would be little use, for it had without doubt been her own fault and no one else's.

"Didn't you realise you'd be cut off at high tide?"

"Of course not," Kim replied. "I — I didn't realise."

He looked down at Ronnie and frowned again. "Where's Lee?"

Kim hardly dared tell him, indeed she was not required to, for Ronnie was only too eager to supply the answer. "He went in after Captain Blood and got stuck," he announced brightly, and James looked at Kim for explanation, his expression discouraging.

"He — I'm afraid he's got himself stuck in a crack in the rock," she told him, not daring to look at him, but looking as guilty as any of the children could have done.

"He's what?" The gaze of his light grey eyes was so compelling that she was forced to raise her own.

"He's in there." She pointed to the narrow crevice behind which she could almost feel Lee waiting for his uncle's wrath to descend on him.

He put Terry down carefully on the sand, standing with his hands on his hips, looking down at her as if she was one of the children and gifted with no more sense. "You've really had a good time, haven't you?" he declared. "What else has happened?"

"Nothing else." She felt bound to defend herself at least in part, especially since Ronnie was eyeing her speculatively in a way that recognised her as a fellow wrongdoer. "We were having a good time until Lee got stuck in there."

"Except that you'd have been stranded for heaven knows how long," he retorted scornfully. "And you're the one who told me I wasn't fit to be in charge of children!" She did not retort as he obviously expected her to, and she thought he might even have been disappointed at her lack of response. "Oh well," he sighed resignedly, "we'd better see about extracting Lee from his trap."

"I — I read somewhere once," Kim ventured warily,

"that if you turn the child round so that there's no resistance from his ears, it's easier."

Surprisingly he almost smiled. "Clever girl," he told her, with only a hint of sarcasm. "I wonder you didn't put it into operation earlier."

"I – I was a bit wary in case I hurt him," she replied, and he raised his eyes to heaven.

"You can't make omelettes without breaking eggs," he informed her with what she thought was a callous disregard for poor Lee's comfort.

He bent and brought his eyes level with the hopeful gaze inside the rock. "We'll have you out in no time at all, old son," he informed him with a confidence Kim felt was not assumed as her own had been. "Face me and push your head through," he instructed, and there were faint scrabbling sounds as Lee moved to obey. "Come on," his uncle encouraged, "head first."

A second later a small tousled head appeared, the face dusty and tear-streaked but unutterably relieved. "Right, now turn yourself sideways," James told him, still quite matter-of-factly. The little face puckered in concentration and he squirmed and wriggled for a few seconds, then looked hopefully at James, who grinned encouragingly at him. "Now push with your feet," he was told.

He must have used his legs with every ounce of his strength, for a second later he came out of the crevice until only his feet were still trapped. "Right," James instructed him confidently, "now turn on to your back, old son, and get your feet out. O.K.?"

Lee nodded eagerly, puffing and blowing as he turned on to his back. Once turned, James pulled him out, with such ease that Kim stared unbelievably and Lee's eyes blinked in wonder at being free at last.

"I'm out!" He lay for a moment on the sand, quite en-

joying his moment of notoriety, Kim thought wryly, with James rubbing his tousled head consolingly. It was obvious who was going to be held responsible for the incident, and Kim already felt guiltily miserable about it.

"I — I should have been able to cope like that," she ventured, and James turned a far from complimentary gaze on her.

"I did warn you," he reminded her. "There's more to looking after a ready-made family than sweet smiles and soothing noises. You also need eyes in the back of your head and the ability to be in two places at once."

"I suppose you do." She looked so utterly dejected at her failure as a guardian that he half smiled.

"Oh, you'll learn," he said, but without much conviction. "Now, if everybody's ready, I'll get you back to civilisation."

He lifted Terry into his arms again and Lee held on to Kim's hand with touching confidence, considering all things. Ronnie brought up the rear, the only one obviously reluctant to leave the cove.

It was not unreasonable for James to be angry, Kim thought, as she covertly glanced at his still disapproving face, but she wished she did not feel so childishly tearful as they all trooped down to the boat.

He deposited Terry safely, then helped the two boys in and finally turned to look at Kim, still standing on the rock. There was a hard, half scornful look in the light eyes when he looked at her and she lowered her own hastily, partly to hide the mist of tears in them.

"I've a damned good mind to leave you here until the next low tide and let you walk back," he informed her, hands on hips, his mouth grim.

Kim swallowed hard on the tears of reaction that threatened and shook her head. "You can do as you like, Mr.

Fleming. I know you're angry and to a certain extent I don't blame you, so if you think it will do any good, by all means leave me here."

He looked at her steadily for a moment, as if he was considering it as a possibility, then a single tear escaped and rolled dismally down her face, plopping on to her hand. "Come on." Hands reached up for her and swung her down into the boat, holding her longer than was necessary to steady her against the sway of the tide. "Baby !" His lips brushed her face briefly and he shepherded the children up close between them before starting the engine.

He made no effort to go full out on the way to Woodsea, but took the boat fairly well inshore and beyond the marker buoys that indicated the course of the race. It must have been a bitter pill for him to swallow, Kim thought, as they skirted the buoys, and she could have wished that almost anyone else had come along first.

There were a few more people than usual about when they tied up at the pier in Woodsea, although the race was over as far as they were concerned, and one or two looked at James curiously as he unloaded his passengers.

He walked with them as far as Summer House and there stopped by the gate. "I'll take them into Mrs. Pannet," he told her. "She'll cope until I get back."

"Please," Kim ventured, "I can have them."

He studied her woebegone face dubiously. "I'd have thought you'd had enough for one day," he told her. "Mrs. Pannet's used to them, she won't mind."

"Oh, please let them stay with me !" She looked as soulful as any of the children and she thought she saw a hint of his more normal laughter in his eyes.

"O.K.," he agreed at last, "if you're sure. I suppose none of you can get into much mischief under your aunt's watchful eye, can you?"

As if on cue, Aunt Bess opened the door and if she was surprised to see them all there, she did not show it, but welcomed the children with genuine delight.

"I'll be in in a moment, Aunt Bess," Kim told her, "I — I just want a word with Mr. Fleming."

Kim felt very small and vulnerable as she turned and faced him again, and she could more than ever sympathise with the boys when they had earned their uncle's wrath. He could look very overpowering when he was angry as he had been at the cove, his usually light eyes a dark, stormy grey that was positively frightening, at least now they looked more normal, although hardly encouraging.

They were standing in the shelter of the high hedge that separated the two front gardens and he looked more impatient than angry at the moment. "I hope this won't take long," he told her discouragingly. "I have a party waiting for me in Dimsea, although it won't be quite the same now."

"I'm — I'm sorry."

"So you said before," he told her.

"Well, I am!" She felt herself growing angry and rued the inevitability of it. Angry too because the tears she had fought so hard to resist now stood bright and glistening in her eyes.

"Well, you don't have to get so upset about it," he insisted. "Here!" A large white handkerchief was pushed into her hand and she automatically took it, blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

"Thank you."

"Feeling better?" She nodded, though in truth she felt more miserable than ever. Not only had she spoiled George's day by not going with him, but the children's and James Fleming's as well. She was utterly and inconsolably sorry for herself, and the fact that he was already turning

to go did not help matters.

"James !" He spun round sharply, almost as if he had been waiting for her to call him back, the light eyes glistening with some indefinable expression. "I — I didn't want it to turn out like this. I mean I didn't mean to spoil George's plans and I didn't *want* you to lose the race."

"I'd wallop you if I thought you did," he told her darkly, smiling in a way that made her cheeks colour hotly.

"I'm trying to explain," she went on desperately. "Everything went wrong and it wasn't a bit like I wanted it to be, like I meant it to be. I'm sorry you lost the race, I really am. I only wanted to give the children an outing and — and, oh, I don't know — everything's gone wrong!" Tears were rolling unchecked down her cheeks and she did not care, any mote than she cared that the words were just tumbling over each other and making very little sense.

It was doubtful if even Terry could have looked more woebegone and she felt he must be thoroughly embarrassed by her outburst. It would probably be the last straw and he would simply walk off and leave her there; it was no more than she deserved.

Instead, however, a moment later she was hazily aware of a pair of strong arms hugging her tight and a voice murmuring soothingly against her ear. "All right, all right, come on now." Just as if he was consoling Terry. One large hand pressed her tearful face against his chest and his fingers moved caressingly through her hair. "Don't cry, Kim, don't cry any more."

He could have been consoling Terry, she thought hazily, except that there was something more than mere consolation in the caressing fingers through her hair.

CHAPTER VI

IT was obvious the next morning when Kim reported for work that someone, it could only have been Eve Mellors, had told George at least something of what had happened to prevent James Fleming winning the race, for he eyed her curiously when she came into the room.

"I gather you had quite an eventful day yesterday," he remarked, and Kim's brows flicked him a brief frown.

"It wasn't quite what I expected," she admitted, giving her attention determinedly to preparing her desk for work.

"It wasn't quite what James expected either," George chuckled. "He was all set to sweep the board again this year, instead he didn't even finish the course."

"I know." She still refused to enlarge on the subject and guessed, inevitably, that he would continue his questioning until he was satisfied.

"Eve told me the bare bones of it," he confessed, confirming her suspicion, "but I must admit I'm still very curious."

"I don't doubt you are," Kim allowed wryly, but still held her tongue.

He came across to her then, sensing her reluctance, putting an arm round her waist, his voice persuasive. "Come and tell Uncle George all about it," he coaxed, and added with disarming frankness, "I'm dying to hear your side of it."

Kim smiled ruefully at the confession, but evaded his arm and sat down at her typewriter, determinedly business-like. "You know as much as there is to know," she told him, "and we haven't the time to waste on it. We have to get

this typescript ready for next week, and we'll never do it if you don't get down to some work."

"Slave-driver !" he accused. "Does that mean you're not going to tell me?" He looked disappointed and a little annoyed.

"That's it exactly," Kim affirmed, feeding paper and carbon into her machine.

"Well, I think you should," he complained. "How can I cut Eve down to size if you don't put me in the picture at least a little bit !" George, Kim thought, was being persuasive again, and he was very good at it. "Eve's livid," he added, hopefully trying to prod her into self-defence. "She's furious because James didn't win and the champagne party she had laid on for the celebration was a bit of an anticlimax in the circs. Cousin Evie doesn't like losing, even by proxy." He eyed her speculatively, waiting to see if his tactics were working. "Is it true what Eve said? *Was* it your fault that James lost the race, as she says?"

"I — yes, I suppose it was," Kim admitted, seeing nothing for it but to satisfy his curiosity.

"Well, come on," George encouraged, "tell me more, darling. Don't leave me in mid-air now you've started."

Kim sighed resignedly, unable to resist a smile. "All right," she agreed, "I'll tell you about it, just as long as you promise to get right down to work afterwards."

He raised two fingers, shoulder high, his face solemn. "Cub's honour," he vowed gravely.

Kim leaned back in her chair, a pencil twirling rhythmically between her fingers. "I took the children to what I thought was a safe little cove just round the end of the cliff, only it wasn't as safe as I thought."

George pulled a wry face and shook his head. "I could have told you that if you'd mentioned it," he informed her. "You poor love, what happened?"

"First," Kim explained, "Lee got stuck fast in an unbelievably small crevice in the cliff face and I couldn't get him out."

"That's monster number two, isn't it?" George asked.

"Lee's the middle one," Kim corrected him reproachfully. "Anyway, the poor little soul was really stuck fast and I couldn't think how on earth to get him out. *Mr. Fleming*, of course, soon released him — black mark number one to me. I suppose I should have kept a more careful eye on the boys, but it — well, it just didn't occur to me what boys can get into. I just didn't realise."

"Who would?" George sympathised. "Didn't you realise you'd chosen a dodgy place to go either, darling?"

"Of course not," Kim retorted. "I don't know the place all that well even yet and it looked quiet and safe and just right for them to play. I was horrified when I realised it was cut off at high tide and when the sea came up so fast I had a horrible feeling it might swamp the whole cove."

"Not quite," George told her. "But you must have had the collywobblers for a while there. Of course you could have huddled there and waited for the next low tide then led your little band to safety like Moses through the Red Sea," he added facetiously, "or you could have swum round."

"It wasn't funny," Kim rebuked him, "I was terrified and worried to death about Lee in that wretched crevice. After all, I *was* responsible for them."

"Aah, poor Kim!" He hugged her, planting a kiss on her forehead. "So you sent out distress signals and James picked them up?"

"I didn't intend it should be James," she insisted. "I just told the children to wave and try to catch the eye of someone going past in a boat, if there was anyone. I had no intention of making James lose the race, it — well, it just

happened to be him that came along, leading the field in that wretched race he was so keen on winning."

"Very unfortunate," George commented wryly. "Was he very mad?"

"He was furious at first," Kim agreed, "although in fairness, he didn't say very much, but I could tell."

"I'll bet he was furious," George allowed, "but he wouldn't say very much, he's got enough self-control for ten men sometimes. Apparently the people at the finish, when they heard about him veering off the way he did, thought he'd gone berserk, and there was no end of speculation, then one of the later competitors said he'd seen him with some other people in the cove. After that of course it was realised that he must have been sidetracked for some reason. It was when the observant one mentioned children that Eve saw the light and hit the roof."

"Well, I'm very sorry about spoiling her party," Kim said, "but I've no intention of apologising to her. I told James how sorry I was, but I shan't do the same for your cousin."

"Heaven forbid," George declared piously. "You'd never hear the end of it."

It would have made things easier if Kim had known Eve Mellors was to be there for coffee that morning, then she would have declined George's usual invitation on some pretext or other, but as it was he said nothing, though she was pretty sure he was expecting his cousin to be there. It was almost a shock to walk into the room and see her sitting there, to meet that cold unfriendly gaze directed at her.

She flicked a reproachful glance at George, but he had a firm grip on her arm that forestalled any attempt she might make to turn about. "As you see, darling," he told her, "we're honoured with company this morning."

Eve glared at him coldly. "I hardly rate as company,

George, not in my own house. After all, it's mine as much as yours and I'm perfectly entitled to be here as often and whenever I like."

"Oh, absolutely," George agreed amiably, his gaze guileless as he seated Kim on the settee beside him. "I just thought you might have been consoling James this morning, that's all. After yesterday I imagine he's in need of a soothing hand on the brow and all that."

It was a tactless subject to raise, and the more so because it was so obviously done with malicious intent, and Kim felt herself shrink from it. No doubt Eve Mellors would have mentioned it herself sooner or later, but it was unfair of George, Kim felt, to precipitate the inevitable unpleasantness.

"I would have thought that subject was not one you would have mentioned with your secretary here," Eve told him icily.

"Why not?" George asked blandly, and Fay looked vaguely worried, knowing her brother's penchant for saying the wrong thing, as often as not, deliberately, but it was no use saying anything about it, she knew. George discouraged was George encouraged and he always took a special delight in teasing Eve. He also went out of his way to be even more than usually flirtatious with Kim whenever his cousin was there, simply because he knew it annoyed her.

He leaned across now and kissed Kim's cheek lingeringly, wrinkling his nose at her. "Your conscience is clear as a bell, isn't it, darling?" he asked.

"Of — of course." Kim scarcely knew how to answer for the best. There were times when George could be horribly embarrassing, and this was evidently going to be one of them.

Eve Mellors' sharp eyes gleamed malice. "I suppose you imagine you achieved something by losing James the race,"

she told Kim, her usually drawling voice taut and icy, "but don't fool yourself, Miss Anders, don't for one minute imagine you've made any impression other than a bad one."

To Kim the subject seemed to have grown beyond the bounds of reason in importance and she felt her temper rising at the way she was being treated, both by George and his cousin. "The only thing I tried to achieve, Miss Mellors," she told her, trying to steady her voice, "was the safety of the children. It was a case of priorities and I happened to think that the lives of three babies were most important than winning some — some silly race." The latter was perhaps, she thought, rather unwise, but she was tired of the matter and anxious only to put it into perspective. It was ridiculous to place so much importance on winning a boat race.

The cold eyes gleamed with, if anything, even more malice. "You realise he was leading?"

Kim nodded, her mouth tightening. "I had no idea the children would attract Mr. Fleming especially," she said. "It was only because he *was* leading that he saw us first and came for us, but I'm sure any of the other competitors would have done as much had they realised our position, and without quite so much fuss. It just happened that James — Mr. Fleming was first, and I still think I did right."

Eve Mellors tutted impatiently. "It was sheer stupidity that got you there in the first place, so I understand," she told Kim, and Kim wondered if the opinion was her own or James Fleming's. "One thing is quite certain, you'll never be allowed to be in charge of the children again. James should have left them with Mrs. Pannet, as usual, but —" she shrugged, her lip curled derisively, "I suppose he thought you needed the money."

Kim stared at her in blank disbelief, too stunned even to

be angry as yet. "You surely don't — don't think I was *paid* to have the children?" She felt George stir, as if he would protest, but sent him a look that left him in no doubt that she could deal with Eve Mellors herself.

"Weren't you?" The dark eyes look vaguely uncertain for a moment. "I believe plenty of young women supplement their incomes with baby-sitting."

"Well, in this case it doesn't apply," Kim declared, her eyes sparkling indignation. "I had the children because I promised to take them out one day. There was nothing — professional about the arrangement at all."

"I see." The information was regarded with, if anything, even more suspicion and the sharp eyes looked at her speculatively. "Then may I ask *why* you promised to take the children out?"

Kim shook her head, despairing of ever making a woman like Eve Mellors understand her motives. "I like them," she said, "that's all. Why else?"

The thin mouth expressed scorn. "I can think of a number of reasons," Eve declared, "but nothing you try will do much good after yesterday."

The implication was so obvious and so unexpected that Kim felt the colour flood into her cheeks and she would have made her feelings known in no uncertain way, but for the fact that someone forestalled her.

George had been silent for too long and he determinedly made his presence felt, his usually friendly blue eyes narrowed into an expression almost as malicious as his cousin's. "Don't make wild guesses, Evie dear," he told her. "If Kim has a happy ending with anyone in this neck of the woods it'll be me, so sheath your claws."

Eve looked at her shrewdly for a moment as if she sought confirmation of his words. "I see," she drawled. "How nice for you, Miss Anders, it's not every girl can marry her

boss, especially such a wealthy one as George. Congratulations."

"George —" Kim looked at him, a little dazedly, too confused at the moment to even resent the other girl's implication. All she could see on George's face was a wide smile and a certain smug look of satisfaction as if he had deliberately manoeuvred the situation.

"You could congratulate me too," he told Eve. "I've got a very lovely girl here."

"George," Fay told him reproachfully, "you're being most unfair to Kim and embarrassing her horribly."

"Am I, darling? I'm sorry." He gazed at Kim in apparent rapture, his blue eyes glinting with the pleasure of having scored off Eve. He put an arm round Kim's shoulders and kissed her fervently. "I just couldn't keep it to myself any longer. Do forgive me."

"George, please —" Kim stared at him uncertainly, unwilling to believe he would go to such lengths even to annoy Eve, but nothing in his manner reassured her. He sat as close to her as he could possibly get, gazing rapturously at her mouth as if he might decide to kiss her at any moment.

"Oh, darling, don't be angry with me for speaking out of turn," he begged, and Kim swallowed hard, shaking her head.

"George, stop it!"

He looked as if she had struck him, blinking at her for a moment in silence, then his expression became so contrite she could almost believe it. "Darling, *please* don't hate me, I couldn't bear it if you did."

"George !" Fay added her reproach, but George in an irrepressible mood was, Kim suspected, just that. Nothing would deter him, especially when it was fairly obvious that his cousin had taken the bait he had so carefully laid.

Eve put down her coffee cup on the table in front of her,

her movements unhurried and almost deliberate, then fastidiously dabbed at her lips with a tiny handkerchief. Lowered lids, for the moment, concealed whatever was in her eyes, but Kim could almost feel the resentment. "This is quite a surprise," she said at last, flicking a dark, unfriendly gaze at Kim. "George, of all people!" She stood up, tall and elegant, her long thin hands smoothing a skirt already impeccable. "However, I imagine it's rather too early for an official announcement yet," she went on. "Please don't think me too much of a pessimist, Miss Anders," she added as she passed Kim, "but I know George." Her smile, as she swept from the room, was full of meaning and as malicious as a cat's, and Kim wished the floor would open up and swallow her.

"Oh, George, how could you?" It was Fay who recovered first, and she looked across at her brother reproachfully, while Kim merely sat, silent and a little confused at the turn of events. "It would serve you right," Fay told him, "if Kim walked out on you here and now."

"Oh, she wouldn't do that, would you, my sweet?" He was completely unrepentant and very, very sure of himself as he hugged Kim close and laughed. "That's really given little Evie something to think about," he declared.

Kim's mind cleared gradually and with realisation came anger that she had been used so casually to lend weight to his teasing Eve. She could, she supposed, have made her objections more telling, but it had all happened so quickly and unexpectedly that she had scarcely believed it. Teasing was one thing, she thought crossly, but sending Eve Mellors away with the firm impression that she had promised to marry George was quite another, and it was high time she let him have a little of his own medicine. Fay, she felt sure, would willingly join in if she paid George back in his own coin.

She sighed deeply, tucking her arm through his and, pausing only to pass a conspiratorial wink at Fay, gazed soulfully up at him. "You've made me the happiest woman in the world, darling," she told him demurely. "I'm glad you stood up for me like that and I'm glad you've told me how you feel, although —" she lowered her eyes shyly. "**I** *would* have liked to be the first to know without anyone else about. Anyway, of course **I** forgive you for being — well, premature, and at least Fay knows now."

For a breathless minute George looked down at her, his expression uncertain, then the full meaning of what he had precipitated came to him and he blinked. "Kim — **I** — you, you mean you — you'd —" Try as he would George could not voice the dreaded word "marry", and Kim felt laughter bubble up inside her as she caught Fay's eye.

She looked up at George again, her own eyes widened until they looked as bland and innocent as *a* child's. "You *did* tell Eve you were going to marry me, didn't you?" she asked, and George swallowed hard. "Not in so many words, of course," she added hastily, her smile demure, "but that's what you meant, wasn't it?"

"Of course he did." It was Fay who answered, her eyes shining with suppressed laughter. "I've guessed for some time that George was more serious about you than he's ever been before," she told Kim, "and I'm so pleased, Kim."

"Thank you." Kim's eyes lowered shyly, but not before she exchanged *a* look with Fay that almost shattered her self-control.

George for once was silent, and Kim wondered just how long she could keep up the pretence without bursting into laughter. "Kim —" he began, but faltered when Kim once more raised wide and soulful eyes to him. "It's — it's early days yet, isn't it?" he added lamely.

"Of course, George." She was as solemn as she knew

how. "There's no rush about anything at all, no rush, George."

"Oh, I don't know," Fay disagreed, ignoring the pained look her brother gave her. "I think marriage will do George good, and an autumn wedding would be rather nice. We could go and look for wedding dresses in that little shop in Pepper Street, Kim — they had some lovely ones, do you remember?" Kim nodded, her eyes shining mischief, while George merely sat looking rather dejected and not a bit like a prospective bridegroom at all.

It was a day or two, in fact, before George seemed to recover from the shock, and Kim began to feel sorry for him. It was, she thought, rather a drastic form of revenge for someone like George, and perhaps she and Fay had gone a little too far. When she said as much to Fay, however, Fay laughed at her worry.

"Oh, don't worry about it," she assured her. "I know George, he'll be thinking of ways of getting out of it already. He'll never tread the path to the altar, not my dear brother, although in truth I wish he would. No — I'm only interested to see how long he lets it go on and how he manages to get out of it."

"I'm not exactly worried," Kim demurred, "but I'm wondering if we shouldn't — well, let him know now that it was just to teach him a lesson."

Fay shook her head firmly. "I shouldn't," she advised. "Let him suffer a bit longer. It's time somebody put George firmly in his place, he's far too fond of courting a girl and then laughing it off as if it's all just a game."

"It is to George," Kim declared, "and it has to be played by George's rules too, I imagine, although he's very gallant about it."

That much was true, Kim thought, and wondered what would happen if George should prove gallant enough to

go on with the idea rather than let his own reluctance be known. It was just the kind of over-dramatic, impulsive gesture George would make, and Kim frowned over the prospect of it.

Kim had seen little of James Fleming since the day of the race and she suspected he might be avoiding her deliberately, probably influenced by Eve Mellors, though why he should have been so forgiving in the first instance and then apparently changed his mind, she could not imagine.

She had seen and talked to the children, who seemed none the worse for their adventure; indeed Lee seemed positively proud of his own part in it and was always mentioning that *he* had been the centre of attraction. Kim would have liked to take them out again, but she dared not mention the idea, especially since Eve Mellors had been so sure she would not be allowed to.

There were a lot of blackberries about now that September was well on and the children, she thought, would have enjoyed picking them as she had done as a child. She mentioned blackberry and apple pie to Aunt Bess and her aunt had been enthusiastic, although she demurred at the lateness of the hour when she suggested going there and then.

It wanted only about half an hour to sunset, but Kim thought she had plenty of time to get as many as she wanted and she knew the cliff path quite well by now, well enough to find her way down again in the dusk.

It had ben a lovely day and the sun sat low in the sky as she walked up on to the cliff-top. At this time of the day, she thought, there was an air almost of unreality about the sea and the sky that intrigued her, and she loved it.

As she anticipated, there were hundreds of blackberries, ripe and succulent on the brambles that lay back from the

path, and Kim's mouth watered at the prospect of them combined with apples from Aunt Bess's trees, made into a delicious pie.

She had brought a small basket with her and she left the path just at the top of the ascent, walking over the cool, springy turf already patched with the long shadows of evening as the sun sank lower. She had perhaps left it a little late, as Aunt Bess had said, but it would take very little time to fill her basket and it was so beautifully quiet and peaceful up here that it was worth the walk for that alone.

Very few people came this far from the path, especially this late in the year, and the berries were untouched, in great black clusters just waiting to be gathered. She had come prepared for a harvest and she was not disappointed. Very little effort was needed to reach them and she had no need to reach far to get all she wanted without getting scratched.

She had to admit that it was sheer greed that made her determined to have the huge cluster that sat invitingly right in the centre of the bush. As usual, the best were the most difficult to attain, but she was determined to reach them and she stretched as far as her arm would stretch only to find them still a taunting couple of inches out of reach. Stubbornly refusing to accept defeat, she inveigled her way in among the scratchy brambles and tried again, only another fraction of an inch and she could manage it.

She lifted her weight from one foot to the other, and pushed her left foot still further into the tangle of briar. A second later she grabbed frantically at the vicious arms of the bush and screamed involuntarily when her foot gave way under her, twisting painfully as she landed hard and inelegantly on the ground, too stunned for the moment to move or even try to.

Her foot was still firmly wedged into a hole, a hole that

had formerly been hidden by the long, dry grass and the lower briars, just waiting to trap the unwary. Not only was she held firmly by the captive foot, but releasing it meant getting scratched still more by the tangle of briar that surrounded the hole. A rabbit, at some time or other, had presumably thought it an excellent place for a home, safe from disturbance and, much as Kim liked animals, her opinion of rabbits at that moment was far from complimentary.

Her ankle ached abominably and thorns had torn her tights and scratched her legs, but she could not sit there feeling sorry for herself, so she leaned forward and tried to free herself. More scratches ensued as she struggled to reach her left foot from her seat on the ground, and it was not until she tried to pull it free that she realised it might be worse hurt than she had anticipated. It throbbed with a dull ache at the moment and it had swelled to an ominous size, getting worse even as she sat and gazed at it anxiously.

Her first effort to stand up sent her staggering against the briar and brought another involuntary cry from her as she sank back on to the turf again, biting her lips at the pain. For a moment she sat there, feeling more vulnerable and helpless than she had ever done in her life, nursing the injured ankle and wondering desperately how she was going to walk home when she could not even get to her feet.

It was already dusk and the wind was blowing cold off the sea, uncannily quiet now that the seagulls had gone for the night, with only the swish and sigh of the sea on the rocks below to keep her company. Kim shivered, not so much at the cold wind, but at the prospect before her if she could not manage to walk properly. If it was possible to get that far, the most practical thing to do would be to get as far as Linwood and get George to take her the rest of the way home in his car, but getting down the steep slope from the

cliff would present most of her problems.

She was already feeling extremely sorry for herself when she tried to get up again and once more the vicious arms of the bramble seemed to reach out for her. Her cry this time was as much exasperation as pain, but she at least managed to stay on her feet. To be more exact it was only one foot, for her left ankle was much too painful to bear her weight.

As she stood there, balancing rather precariously on one foot and wondering how on earth she was going to get down the slope to the house, she heard someone coming. Not that anyone made much noise on the sandy path up from the sea wall, but there was a distinct sound of footsteps occasionally striking a small pebble or a piece of rock and she held her breath for a moment, uncertain whether she wanted to be found or not. It would depend who the walker turned out to be whether she made her presence known, and she dropped down on to the turf once more to be less conspicuous.

It could mean rescue or it could be some undesirable character who would only make her predicament worse, although in Woodsea it was unlikely. Until she had some way of knowing, however, she sat small and silent in the shadow of the bramble, trying to see in the almost dark as the sun sank rapidly lower.

"Hello!" The sound of the voice made her gasp audibly and put a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide and uncertain. It was definitely familiar, she thought, although she was uncertain of its identity as yet, so she waited cautiously. "Hello, is anyone there?"

It was the slight hint of impatience in the question that identified the caller and Kim thought she saw a way out of her predicament, although she would rather it had been anyone else who had found her than James Fleming.

"Over here!" she called, and felt his hesitation like a

physical thing as he in turn recognised her. "Behind the brambles," she added for his guidance.

"Kim?" He had not moved, she felt sure of that, and for one crazy minute she wondered if he would leave her there, having identified her.

"Yes, over here."

Guided by her answer, he left the path and came across the sound-deadening turf and round the concealing briars, peering down at her, crouched gnome-like by the bush. "Kim, are you all right?" She found his evident concern gratifying.

"I—I think so," she told him.

"I heard you yell out, or I thought I heard *someone* yell out and I thought —" He hesitated. "Heaven knows what I thought," he added, obviously relieved to find she could answer. "What on earth are you doing, for heaven's sake?"

"At the moment I'm sitting on the ground nursing a sprained ankle," she informed him as matter-of-factly as she could manage.

He hesitated only a second longer, then he was one knee beside her and she could see he was wearing evening dress, although the incongruity of it did not strike her for the moment. "Is it bad?" He could just see the injured limb stretched out, in front of her and, before she could answer, strong exploratory fingers probed the swelling and he whistled softly. "It feels as big as a house," he told her. "What happened?"

"I found *a* rabbit hole," she explained briefly. She had no desire or intention of going into details here and now, though she sensed he expected her to.

"You would." His resignation made her flush resentment, for he sounded just as if he was talking to one of the children and it was a habit she was growing increasingly tired of. "Come on," he added in the same rather patient tone,

"we'd better get you home."

"I can manage if **I** can only get to the bottom of the slope," she informed him, making light of her position.

"George will run me home then."

"You're not seriously suggesting that you try to *walk* down there, are you?" he asked.

"I don't see why not," Kim retorted. "I'm not completely helpless, you know, and if you help me —"

"An ankle like that shouldn't be walked on," he told her firmly, "not on any account. For goodness' sake be sensible, Kim, you'd break your neck as well."

"And for goodness' sake," she echoed, her exasperation obvious, "stop talking to me as if **I** was one of the children!"

She heard the soft, deep chuckle and flushed again. "**I** apologise, Miss Anders," he told her with mock humility. A large; dazzlingly white handkerchief was pulled from his breast pocket and deftly folded before being tied round her ankle. "That'll help a bit until we can bandage you properly," he declared.

"**I** don't need —" she began, automatically prepared to argue with him.

"And for heaven's sake don't start one of your arguments," he interrupted. "What on earth are you doing up here in the dark anyway?"

"**I** *was* picking blackberries," Kim replied shortly, "and now I suppose I've scattered them far and wide, after all my efforts."

"Well, if you think I'm going to scrabble around on my hands and knees after them, you can think again," he informed her, and shook his head. "I don't know, it takes a crazy little creature like you to come blackberrying in the dark, doesn't it?"

"I *like* blackberries," she told him, "and for your information, **I** was here well before it got dark." She glanced

at his dress, really noticing it for the first time. "I might ask what you're doing prowling about on the cliffs in evening dress, if it comes to that," she added. N

He sighed, that air of patient resignation in evidence again as he prepared to explain. "A. I am *not* prowling, Miss Suspicious. I told you I heard someone scream or cry out and, being an upright and honest citizen, I came to see if someone was in trouble, and B. I'm in a dinner suit because I'm supposed to be taking Eve to theatre and dinner in Dimsea."

"Oh, I see." She could guess what Eve Mellors would say if she could see him now.

"I'm sure you do," he told her. "Now I think the best thing I can do is to take you down to Linwood and let Eve know I'll be a bit late, then run you home myself."

"George can —" Kim began, and again he interrupted her.

"George can't," he told her. "He and Fay went into Paxeter and they aren't back yet, at least they weren't five minutes ago."

"I can manage," Kim insisted, hating the idea of being indebted to him or in any way dependent on him. "If you'll just help me down the slope I'll be O.K."

He sighed again, deeply. "Heaven save me from stubborn females !" he prayed. "Come on, you obstinate little wretch."

Kim would have objected to the way he spoke, but before she could utter a word he had scooped her up into his arms and was striding across the turf with her, so that the only sound she made was a faint protesting squeak as she instinctively put an arm round his neck.

He was as sure-footed on the darkness of the steep path as only a native could be, and Kim found herself hanging on to him more for the comfort of holding on to someone

than because she was afraid of falling.

She wondered again, as they went down the slope, what Eve Mellors would have to say when he arrived for his date with her, carrying Kim in his arms, and for a moment the idea intrigued her so much she smiled to herself in the darkness.

"I *could* get home now," she ventured, as they reached the foot of the path.

"Nonsense ! " The answer was brief and explicit and he went on up the driveway of Linwood with every intention of doing as he had suggested.

"I'm only thinking of you," she told him meekly, and she could now see him sufficiently well in the light from the porch lamp to judge his expression. It had obviously not occurred to him that Eve might take exception to the situation and his puzzlement was genuine, she thought.

"Oh?" he might even have been slightly suspicious. "Why should you be so suddenly concerned about me? I could hardly leave you up there in this state, could I?"

"Eve — Miss Mellors might not like it," she suggested, and saw him frown.

"Why?"

"Why ?" She could scarcely believe he did not realise what Eve's reaction would be. "Well — I wouldn't like a man arriving for a date with *me*, carrying a strange girl in his arms."

His laughter was unexpected and the light grey eyes looked wicked in the yellow light, now overhead. "You could be right," he allowed, but seemed completely unconcerned about it.

The front door, as usual at Linwood, was unfastened and a slight push opened it wide. "Eve!" He called out as he walked into the hall, and almost immediately the sitting-room door opened and Eve Mellors came out.

The eager, welcoming smile she wore disappeared when she saw he was not alone, and hardened rapidly when she identified Kim. "What on earth —" she began, but James cut her short, almost as if he had not heard her.

"Kim's had an accident," he told her shortly. "She's sprained an ankle and it looks quite bad, so I'm taking her home first, Eve. Sorry we shall be a bit late, but it can't be helped."

"We shall miss the first act," Eve complained, glaring at Kim as if she suspected deliberate sabotage.

"Darling, it can't be helped." He sounded as if he held his patience with difficulty. "You just be a dear, patient girl and wait for me. I won't be long, I promise."

He spoke with the complete confidence of a man who has no doubt he will have his own way, and Kim marvelled at the way Eve Mellors let him get away with it. She would not let it pass, however, without first questioning the authenticity of the accident.

"I thought I heard your car just now," she told James. "*You* didn't run Miss Anders down, did you?"

"No, of course not." He evidently saw explanation as the quickest way to release and he put Kim down in one of the armchairs while he spoke. "You *did* hear my car," he agreed. "I arrived about ten minutes ago, it was then I thought I heard someone calling out from up on the cliff, and as it happened it was. It must have been Kim yelling when she hurt herself, although I wasn't to know that. It's as well I went to investigate or she'd probably have been up there all night. She stuck her foot in a rabbit hole, and you can see the result."

"I see. Is it very bad?" It was unlikely to be concern that prompted the question, Kim thought, it must have been suspicion.

"Well, see for yourself," James told her, indicating the

swollen foot. "It needs attention, and since George isn't here to run her home and play the gallant, it'll have to be me."

"You needn't bother," Kim declared, objecting to being talked about as if she wasn't there at all. "I've told you I can manage."

"And I've told you not to talk nonsense," he retorted, lifting her into his arms again. "Come on, before we waste the whole evening arguing." He strode to the door, carrying her as easily as if she was a child. "Home, James," he added facetiously, and Kim could not help the giggle that escaped her at the appropriate words, though she was fully aware of the black frown that followed them as she was carried through the door.

When they arrived at Summer House and found it in darkness, Kim frowned. "That's odd," she murmured, "they *must* be in."

James stood her on the step, propped on one leg against the wall of the porch, and used her key to open the front door, calling out before he went in, but receiving no reply. "No one here," he told her as he switched on the hall light, "the birds have flown."

A short note was propped against the mirror on the hall-stand and explained the empty house. Kim made a wry face as she read it. "Kim — Uncle John and I have been invited round to the Slaters' for a drink and a chatter. We shan't be late, dear. Love, Aunt Bess."

"Well, I can't leave you unattended," James told her. "I'll settle you somewhere comfortable, call the doctor and let your aunt know, O.K.?"

"But you can't do all that," Kim protested. "You'll miss the second act as well as the first and Miss Mellors will be furious. Please — if you'll just help me to the settee in there, I can sit still until Aunt Bess comes home."

"No." He was adamant as he carried her through to the sitting-room and deposited her on the settee. He stood for a moment looking down at her, his expression determined. "For one thing," he enlarged when he saw an argument looming, "I don't trust you to sit still for five minutes once I've gone, and for another I shouldn't think much of myself as a knight errant if I didn't take better care of you than that. Now — where do these friends of your aunt's live, and which doctor do you have?"

"I don't *need* a doctor," Kim insisted, "and there's no need to spoil their evening as well as yours and Miss Mel

"It doesn't please James," he retorted. "That ankle needs attention."

"It only needs a cold compress and a bandage, that's all," Kim argued, "and I can quite well do that myself."

"No, you can't, you stubborn little wretch." He sounded exasperated. "You're to sit still while I ring the doctor."

"No !" She reached over and gripped his hand as he prepared to dial, glad the telephone was near enough for her to reach without any undue effort. "He'll think it's — an emergency or something," she protested, "calling him out at this time in the evening. Please don't."

His sigh was deep and resigned and he sat down on the edge of the settee beside her. "You," he told her slowly and with infinite patience, "are as much trouble as the three monsters put together and twice as stubborn. Also you have the advantage in so far as I can turn them over' my knee and wallop them into submission when need be, but a veneer of civilisation and good manners prevents me from doing the same to you, sorely as I'm tempted."

Some glint of wickedness in the light grey eyes sparked off her own spirit and she shook her head, an indefinable warmth flowing through her suddenly and a desire to laugh

at nothing in particular. "Your dubious ancestors," she accused, "are they tempting you?"

"Old Abel Fleming himself," he agreed solemnly. "*He* wouldn't have let you talk him round."

"But you wouldn't strike an injured woman?" she asked, as his eyes swept over her, fighting wildly with the impulsive urge that wanted him to kiss her.

"Wouldn't I?" He sat facing her, one hand resting on the back of the settee, so close she could feel the warmth and excitement that surrounded him and see the fascinating small lines at the corners of his eyes.

"James —"

He was already leaning over her, his gaze fixed disturbingly on her mouth, when a slight chill betrayed a door opening somewhere and a voice called from the hall. "Kim? The door's open, are you all right?"

She just had time to register the disappointment in James' grey eyes before the door of the room opened cautiously and George came in.

CHAPTER VII

GEORGE had insisted that Kim should stay home the following morning at least, and nurse her ankle. Although it already felt much better and far less painful, thanks to Aunt Bess's ministrations with cold compresses and bandages, it was still quite badly swollen and would not take her weight without a good deal of discomfort, so she was not averse to obeying his instructions.

He had come round the night before, he explained, the minute he had heard about her accident from Eve when he and Fay arrived home. Apparently, since he had said nothing, he had no idea of what he had interrupted, so perhaps James' intention had been less obvious to him than it had been to her. What Eve Mellors had said to James on his return to Linwood was something Kim could not help but be curious about. What would have happened if George had not appeared so providentially, she did not even consider, although she had to admit to sharing something of the disappointment that had showed briefly in James' eyes.

Aunt Bess fussed around and quite obviously was enjoying her nursing duties, and it was only because Kim insisted that she allowed her to get up. As she did not feel in the least ill, Kim said, she could not possibly stay in bed all day or she would get horribly bored; as it was she chafed under the inactivity and welcomed a visit from George during the morning. He was ushered in by a smiling Aunt Bess whose pleasure at seeing him was so obvious that Kim felt quite self-conscious when she realised her reason.

He came laden with fruit and flowers which Aunt Bess took as a further indication of his intentions, and made

signs at Kim with her eyes, that there was no mistaking.

"I'm not *ill*," Kim protested when she saw his sober expression, for he looked as if he expected to see her at death's door. "I'll be ready to come back to work tomorrow, George, I've only sprained my ankle."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" He looked genuinely anxious, and Kim thought how Victorian and romantic he looked this morning. No wonder Aunt Bess had been misled. She had not dared mention the trick she and Fay were playing on him for fear her aunt took it seriously enough to start planning.

She looked at him for a moment and wondered if she would be so very surprised if she really did fall in love with George, he was undoubtedly very attractive and he *was* fond of her, though just how fond she would not like to guess.

He sat on a chair beside the settee where she lay, his grey blue eyes soulful and earnest as he regarded her anxiously. His fair hair was long enough to touch the collar of the corded velvet jacket he wore and a cravat of the same colour flowed down from the collar of his shirt. He looked so much like a Victorian poet and the picture was so deceptive that she could not help smiling, even laughing softly as he looked at her.

"I thought you'd be glad to see me," he said reproachfully. "And I don't know why you have to laugh at me, you hard-hearted little witch — stop it!"

Kim shook her head, trying to look apologetic. "I'm sorry, George," she told him, and leaned across to kiss him lightly beside his mouth. "I'm very glad to see you really, it's just that — that you're like two different people and I'm never sure which one is the real one."

He looked puzzled. "Am I?" he asked.

Kim nodded. "One the romantic poetic type that Aunt

Bess sees and one the — the sophisticated George I know best. It's very deceptive, George."

He frowned over it for a moment. "It's very useful," he admitted at last, and joined in her laughter at his honesty. "Anyway," he told her when they were sobered once more, "don't come back until you're absolutely fit, darling. I'd hate you to suffer on my account."

"I won't suffer," Kim promised, "but by tomorrow morning I shall be thoroughly fed up with being an invalid and perfectly capable of managing that short distance along the sea wall to Linwood."

He bent and put his hands either side of her face, kissing her mouth gently. "I'm dying to have you back, Kim love. It doesn't seem the same without you, and I can fetch you in the car, so there's no need to walk. By the way —" he straightened up suddenly as if he had done his duty as a sick visitor and was now returning to normal, eyeing her with his more usual glimmer of impudence, "you certainly upset Eve last night with your little episode, she was fuming when Fay and I got home."

"I expect she was. I feel rather guilty about it," Kim admitted, and explained exactly what had happened, much to George's interest. She did, however, omit the scene he had interrupted with his arrival, since it had no place in the story and could serve no useful purpose except arouse a certain amount of speculation on George's part, perhaps.

"No wonder she was fuming," he laughed. "Eve hates missing anything, even the first act of a play. She likes to make an entrance, you see, and half way through the play isn't the best time to do that, and the fact that James was playing Sir Galahad to you must have turned the knife in the wound."

"It was *his* idea," Kim insisted, "not mine."

He grinned down at her.. "Never mind, darling, I believe

you even if Eve doesn't, and she'll never give you the benefit of the doubt no matter how you insist."

Kim flushed, disliking the implication. "There's no doubt to be given the benefit of," she argued, ungrammatically. "You surely don't think **I** could *fake* a thing like this, do you?" She extended her injured ankle for his inspection and he winced at the sight of it swollen and bandaged.

"Hardly, love," he told her. "It looks inhuman done up like that." He rose and bent to kiss her again, dismissing the subject with his usual aplomb. "Not to worry, my sweet," he told her blithely, "I'll come for you in the morning and we'll all be back to normal."

George had only left the house a few minutes when the door bell was rung again and a moment later Kim heard Aunt Bess's voice in the hail. She had no difficulty either in identifying the voice of the visitor and found herself smiling automatically and touching her hair **to** check its tidiness.

Aunt Bess sounded at first surprised and then gently insistent, and a moment later the door of the sitting-room opened and she came in with James Fleming.

Kim, with a welcoming smile all ready, hastily dismissed it when she saw his expression. It was not that he looked angry exactly, more cold and distant, and there was none of the usual laughter in his eyes, only a rather superior chilliness.

"Mr. Fleming has brought your shoe back, dear," Aunt Bess informed her brightly, apparently unaware of her guest's reluctance, "and the basket too, I'm glad to say."

"Thank you, James." She could think of nothing else to say at the moment. That cold unfriendly look troubled her more than she cared to admit and she was glad when Aunt Bess went out of the room and left them alone.

"**I** hope your foot's better this morning," he said, ignor-

ing her sign that he should sit down and instead standing some distance away, looking stiff and formal.

"Much better, thank you." **She** indicated 'a chair again. "Please sit down."

He shook his head, briefly and impatiently. "No, thanks, **I** really had no intention of seeing you. **I** merely brought your things back."

"I see." This new James she found even more disconcerting than the one she was more used to, and she sought for some reason for the change in him. There was nothing that she could think of that could possibly account for it. Unless he was suffering from a qualm of conscience after last night, or possibly from the effect of Eve Mellors' tongue, although in view of what Kim had seen of them together, it was unlikely that Eve would take such a chance. "It was very good of you to bother with my shoe," she told him, and laughed uneasily. "Actually **I** hadn't realised it was missing."

"It was no bother," he assured her. "I happened to be passing the spot and remembered your basket must still be there somewhere. Your shoe was still in the hole where you fell." He half turned away, prepared to go without explanation of his manner, and Kim was reluctant to let him. "I'm glad your foot's better," he added.

"James ! " She let him get as far as the door before she called him and it seemed he turned only reluctantly, one hand still on the handle of the door, as if he had no intention of being detained. "What — what's wrong?"

"Wrong?" He obviously meant to be obtuse, and Kim frowned.

"What have I done?" she asked plaintively. "You're so — so unfriendly you make me feel guilty and I don't know why. Why are you so different? Is it something I've said or done?"

He looked at her for a moment in silence, his face set, then relinquished his hold on the door handle and came back across the room towards her. From her place on the settee Kim felt horribly small and vulnerable, and as she had said, inexplicably guilty, though she had no idea why she should.

"I can't altogether blame you, I suppose," he told her, obviously under the impression he was being generous. "I did rather force the issue by bringing you home."

Kim still looked puzzled. She could guess, she thought, to what he referred, but she was at a loss as to why he was treating *her* like the villain of the piece. She had had no part in his being there, it had been at his own insistence that he had brought her home, and surely he had started that rather provocative conversation just before George arrived.

"I – I don't know what you're talking about," she told him, on the defensive and ready to turn the tables. "It was you who insisted on bringing me home, and there was nothing in what followed that could cause raised brows, was there?"

He looked slightly discomfited for a second, as if he recalled that brief intimate moment with far less pleasure than she had earlier. "You didn't see fit to tell me that you were going to marry George," he accused, and with such an air of righteousness that, initially, she felt like laughing rather than losing her temper.

So that was it, Kim thought wryly. There was no doubt who his informant had been, of course, and she had probably hinted at all sorts of unpleasantnesses if George found out he had insisted on playing knight errant instead of letting her wait for her cousin to arrive home. It was, she realised, his conscience bothering him, and with typical male reasoning he sought to settle the blame for his near

indiscretion on her.

"I saw no reason to tell you anything," she informed him rather haughtily.

"Oh?" He looked, she thought, a little surprised at her reaction and perhaps even a little disapproving.

"Well — it didn't *matter*, did it?" she asked, reasonably, she felt.

"No, I suppose not," he agreed, but reluctantly.

Kim looked up at him. "I suppose Eve — Miss Mellors told you about George and me?" she guessed, and he nodded.

"Yes, she did."

Kim was beginning to enjoy the situation, she had to admit. It was so seldom that she had the upper hand, and never before had she been able to make him feel uneasy; more often it was she who was forced- into rather ignominious defeat while he smiled his triumph.

"Anyway," Kim went on airily, "I don't quite see what there is to make such a fuss about. Did you expect me to tell you I was — was supposed to be marrying George, in the circumstances? At what point did you expect me to suddenly make the announcement?"

He looked at her steadily for a moment, and she could see the change in his manner; it showed in his eyes long before he spoke. "All right, Kim, have it your way. I *was* to blame for bringing you home last night. I was too insistent, I suppose, but I didn't realise — well, I didn't realise how things were or I'd — I'd never have — behaved as I did."

"Wouldn't you?" She knew her manner was almost as provocative as it had been last night and there was absolutely no excuse for her behaving the way she was, but some inner devil of mischief prodded her into it.

The light eyes held hers steadily for a moment, then he shook his head slowly. "If I were in George's place, I'd —"

He closed his mouth firmly on what he would have done and turned on his heel, walking across the room with a stride that spoke of anger and impatience, banging the door closed behind him, so that Aunt Bess looked puzzled when she put her head round the door a moment later.

"Oh, Mr. Fleming's gone," she smiled. "Wasn't it nice of him to bring your things back, dear? I'm so glad **I** haven't lost that basket, it's rather a favourite."

"I'm glad," Kim agreed absently, and Aunt Bess eyed her speculatively.

"Did I hear the door slam just now?" she asked, and Kim nodded, but made no attempt to enlighten her as to the cause. Aunt Bess sought a subject she felt more sure of. "Mr. Daley was *very* concerned about you, wasn't he?" she asked, her eyes gleaming anticipation. "He really feels quite deeply about you, dear, I'm sure he does."

Kim smiled wryly. "George is nice," she said, and Aunt Bess looked disappointed.

"Only nice, dear?" She looked at her curiously. "Kim, are you all right? You look — **I** don't know quite, a bit down in the mouth is what **I** mean, I suppose." She came and sat beside Kim in one of the armchairs, seemingly determined to find out what it was that had sent James Fleming out of the house in such an obvious bad humour. "Mr. Fleming didn't upset you, did he?"

"He — he was annoyed about something, that's all," Kim told her with a faint smile.

"With you?"

"With me," Kim agreed, seeing the inevitable explanations looming "It's some silly joke that George started and Fay and I took up. Eve Mellors is such a snob and she dislikes me having coffee with them — Fay and George. She was being particularly nasty about a week ago and George thought he'd be funny at her expense, and at mine, as it

happened. He told Eve we were going to be married."

"Married?" Aunt Bess's eyes almost popped out of her head at the idea. "Are you going to be married **to** George Daley?"

"No, of course not, Aunt Bess," Kim laughed. "No one *marries* George, he's just not the type — that's why Fay and **I** decided to keep up the pretence that we took him seriously and teach him a lesson."

Her aunt began to look a little confused at the whole thing, and Kim could scarcely blame her. She also looked disappointed, which was inevitable in view of her plans for Kim and George. "It's rather a mess, dear, isn't it?" she suggested mildly, and Kim could not but agree with her. "But are you sure Mr. Daley was only joking?"

Kim laughed. "You didn't see his face when Fay and **I** pretended to take it seriously," she told her. "No, Aunt Bess, George is busily trying to find a way out, you can be quite sure of that."

"But all these flowers," Aunt Bess insisted, looking round, "and the way he looks at you — are you sure?"

Kim laughed. "I'm quite sure, Aunt Bess. George always looks and sometimes behaves like something in a romantic novel, but he's strictly a bachelor type, and Fay and **I** both know it."

"Does Mr. Fleming know, or rather think, you're going to marry Mr. Daley?"

Kim nodded. "Mmm."

Aunt Bess looked dubious. "It doesn't seem very honest, dear, does it?" she ventured. "Wouldn't it have been better to have told him the truth?"

Kim shrugged. "Probably," she admitted. "But it's no concern of his, so I didn't." George, she thought determinedly, was not the only one who should be taught a lesson.

"Ah well," Aunt Bess said hopefully, "maybe it won't

just be a joke after all, hmm?" And Kim could not help laughing at her determined optimism. It would not be her aunt's fault if George Daley did not become her nephew-in-law.

As he had promised, George arrived next morning to take Kim to work in the car, and *he* kept up the practice for the next couple of weeks or so too. It was only when Kim insisted that she was perfectly able to walk now that he agreed to let her make her own way.

She saw very little of James Fleming and on the occasions when she did he seemed to have recovered at least some of his former manner, although he was still inclined to be far more formal than before. It was difficult to remember how easy it had been to flirt with him after he brought her home on the night she hurt her ankle. She still stubbornly refused to tell him that her supposed engagement to George was no more than a joke, and she had begged Fay not to tell him either.

It was George himself who puzzled her rather. Since his initial shock at the situation he seemed almost to have accepted it, and Fay shook her head over his uncharacteristic behaviour. "I want to see just how far he'll go," she told Kim when Kim suggested they end the whole thing.

"He knows we weren't serious," Kim told her, "or at least he guesses. He must do, or —"

Fay nodded wisely, her eyes glistening with a devilment reminiscent of her brother. "Either that or he really is serious, Kim."

"Oh, he can't be," Kim protested, suddenly uneasy. "Not George, he's never serious, Fay, especially about anything as final as marriage."

"Nevertheless," Fay insisted, "I've never known him keep anything going as long as this before. He just *might*

be serious about you, Kim, have you thought of that?" She eyed Kim speculatively. "What would you do if he was?"

Kim shook her head, her eyes uncertain. "I — I don't know, I honestly don't know. George can be very charming and I'm very fond of him, but marriage —" She shook her head again. "I just don't know, Fay."

"We could find out," Fay suggested quietly, but with that glimmer of mischief still showing, "by suggesting a wedding date, then if he takes *that* in his stride, we'll know he's serious."

"But we can't," Kim objected, unwilling to take the chance, "it's too risky, Fay."

So the matter was left, rather unsatisfactorily, in the air, although several times Kim was tempted to mention it to George, only Fay's thorough enjoyment of the situation kept her quiet. It would be bound to work out right, she thought optimistically, and let things drift.

Thanks to Kim's efforts, the pile of work she had been required to tackle initially had diminished and there was really very little for her to do some days, so that when George suggested one morning that she might like to work on a temporary basis for someone else, she could not claim to be so busy it was out of the question.

"It's a friend of mine," George told her, looking at her in what she mentally dubbed a shifty way.

"Well, it's up to you, of course," she demurred. "I don't mind helping out of it won't interrupt anything you're doing. I presume," she added, "that I shall still be employed by you — I'm not getting the sack?"

"Good lord, no!" He looked shocked at the idea. "Not on any account would I part with you permanently. It's just that this friend of mine needs a secretary for a week or two while he's laid up after an accident and I offered to lend him mine."

"Very generous of you," Kim told him dryly. "Who is he? Anyone I know?"

His air was too casual, she realised a moment later. It was as if he fully expected her to object and was trying to diminish the effect of her protest by being as offhand as possible. "James."

Kim stared at him, some section of his earlier statement sticking in her mind. "Did — did you say he'd had an

?" she asked, and George nodded.

"Yesterday," he told her. "He bent his car and broke a leg and he has to stay put for a bit, but with James that's just not on, and wants someone to do secretarial work for him at home."

"But why me?" Kim asked, still scarcely believing her ears. "What about the super-efficient Miss Norton, or Morton whoever she is?"

"Ah well, now," George explained. "Miss Norton, you see, is in Austria on her hols at the moment and James has been sharing a secretary with another bod, but the poor girl can't be in two places at once, so James is seeking outside help."

"And I'm supposed to be the outside help?" Kim asked.

"I offered," George said humbly. "I didn't think you'd mind as we're not too busy at the moment."

"Did you find out how long it's for?"

George shrugged. "Oh, not for long, about four or five days, that's all. I said you'd show your face on Monday if that's all right."

Kim smiled wryly. "I don't have much choice, do I?" she asked. "You've made all the arrangements and I've been handed over like a — a piggie going to market!"

George hugged her close, kissing her mouth gently and with all his charm in evidence as he sought to placate her. "You don't really mind helping poor old James out for a

day or two, do you, darling?" He kissed her again, his eyes pleading and anxious — George at his most irresistible. "Not just to please me?"

Kim laughed softly, shaking her head over the blatant deliberation of it. "All right," she agreed, "I'll go. I'll report to Mr. Fleming on Monday morning — when?"

"Oh, I don't know," George shrugged, "about nine, I suppose." He grinned. "One thing, darling, you won't have far to go to work, will you?"

Far to go or not, Kim declined to show her face at the house next door until dead on nine o'clock, and it was a rather surprised Mrs. Pannet who admitted her, so obviously her coming there had not been explained to the housekeeper.

She was first welcomed by Lee and Terry, who greeted her arrival with rather more enthusiasm than she expected from their uncle. "You comin' to be with us?" Lee asked, and Kim shook her head, smiling.

"Not with you exactly, Lee. I'm going to do some work for your uncle."

Lee looked puzzled for a moment. "For James?" he asked. "Why?"

Kim smiled wryly, ruffling his mop of hair with one hand. "That's a very good question," she told him.

"Can we come too?" Lee asked, and little Terry nodded her head, her eyes hopeful.

"I shouldn't think so," Kim told them. "It's only office work and not really very interesting at all. You wouldn't like it."

Lee considered this for a moment, then tried another tack. "I don't think James can work today," he informed her gravely, "he's hurted his leg."

"I know." Kim was aware of Mrs. Pannet watching her

with patient resignation by one of the doors that led off the hall and wondered if James Fleming was listening to these delaying tactics with impatience or if he would understand. "That's why I'm here," she explained, "because your uncle can't go to his office. I'm going to help him."

The argument would have been interminable, Kim thought, but James Fleming's voice called from the other side of the door, "Mrs Panned " and the housekeeper started almost guiltily.

She opened the door and went in. "Yes, Mr. Fleming?"

"Is that Miss Anders?"

"Yes, sir, she's talking to the children. Shall I ask her to come in now?"

"If she can spare the time." The sarcasm made Kim flush and she deliberately stopped to ruffle Lee's mop again before going across the hall and past Mrs. Pannet in the doorway.

"Good morning, Mr. Fleming."

He was sitting on a long settee, much as she had done herself when he came to see her after she hurt her ankle. His leg, however, was far more heavily encased in plaster of Paris from foot to knee and he looked as if he resented being immobile, for his face was as black as thunder.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you?" he told her, and Kim's eyes sparkled.

She closed the door carefully behind her and came across the room to where he sat, for once able to tower over him. "I know how you must be chafing under the inactivity," she told him, with as much patience as if she was talking to one of the children, "but you don't have to take it out on me or Mrs. Pannet."

For a moment she thought he would explode, and the light grey eyes were stormily dark as he looked up at her helplessly, then he laughed. True it was a short, harsh sound

at first, but gradually it became more normal and the light eyes shone with it. "You *are* having your own back, aren't you?" he said.

"I'm not trying to have my own back," Kim denied, unable to hide her own laughter and glad of the change in him. She could not have borne the bad-tempered image he had first presented and would probably have departed in high dudgeon.

He eyed her for a moment, more soberly. "Thank you for coming, Kim. I'm grateful you're prepared to help out."

Kim smiled wryly, prepared to be honest. "I hadn't much choice, to be quite honest," she admitted. "George more or less presented me as a *fait accompli*, so I understood, but I don't mind helping out — we're not very busy at the moment."

"So I gathered," he said, and eyed her thoughtfully. "Did George give you a choice? I hope he wasn't too high-handed about it."

Kim smiled, unable to resist the jibe. "*George* isn't high-handed," she told him, and he laughed.

"All right, all right. Shall we get down to some work? I presume you're used to business procedure?"

"I am," Kim nodded, and picked up the shorthand notebook that lay on the table near him. "I've worked for business men before."

"Ah yes," he smiled, "I remember — some are very nice, some quite the reverse." He cocked a quizzical eyebrow at her. "You never did say which category I came into," he added, and Kim refused to meet his eyes.

"Shall we start?" she suggested.

It was mostly a matter of routine letters which Kim had done for many years before she worked for George, and she had to admit to quite enjoying the change, although she would not have liked to go back to it permanently.

It was when they were part way through a rather complicated report on some new production method or other that Mrs. Pannet knocked tentatively on the door and James Fleming frowned his annoyance at the disturbance. "Excuse me, Mr. Fleeting," she began, and got no further, for Eve Mellors literally pushed her way past her in the doorway and came into the room, her face a picture of anger and dislike.

"I don't have to be announced like a visitor," she informed Mrs. Pannet, and glared across at Kim, who met the angry gaze with as much calm as she could summon.

"Eve!" He was, Kim thought, a little annoyed, but more surprised to see her. "What brings you here at this time of day?"

"I came to see how you were," Eve claimed, "and to tell you I think you're very unwise to be working at home. I'm sure Doctor Morgan would agree with me too."

"Possibly," James agreed wryly, "but I intend to carry on regardless of both of you."

The angry dark eyes still glared at Kim. "Why isn't Miss Norton here?" she asked. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind coming over from Woodmouth for a few days."

"I expect she wouldn't," James agreed again, and with a little less patience. "But she'd take an extremely dim view of coming over from Austria every morning."

"Oh, I see, she's on holiday." She sat down in one of the armchairs, with the evident intention of staying. "Well, I hope you're not overdoing it, darling, it's only one day and you must still be suffering from shock." She managed to convey that Kim's presence there could be attributed to the same cause, and James Fleming smiled.

"Kim's helping out for a day or two," he told her. "George was very self-sacrificing and let me have her for a while."

"Very noble of him," Eve remarked, "especially in view of their — their relationship." A thin hand expressed scorn for the so-called relationship. "I presume you *are* still engaged to George?" she added, and Kim determinedly held her tongue on the truth, partly because, like George, she knew it annoyed Eve.

"Nothing's changed, Miss Mellors," she told her quietly and with no more than the truth.

"Haim." It seemed, Kim thought, that Fay was not the only one surprised by the length of time George was keeping the pretence going.

James Fleming, she thought, was looking at her with a somewhat speculative look and she tried not to meet his eyes. "When's the wedding to be?" he asked, taking Kim by surprise.

"I — it's not fixed yet," she admitted. "There's plenty of time."

"Oh, of course," he agreed blandly. "I only asked because he's asked me to be his best man."

CHAPTER VIII

FAY stared at Kim unbelievably when she told her about George's asking James to be his best man. "I just can't believe it," she told her. "James must have been teasing you, Kim, surely."

Kim shook her head, her frown uncertain. "He *sounded* serious enough," she said, still remembering her own open-mouthed receipt of the news.

The two of them were sitting in their favourite seat in the window of a small coffee house. The window overlooked the sea and the seat, being set deep in the small bow, gave them a feeling of isolation. It was a place they came to whenever they wanted to be free of George for a while and it had the advantage of staying open until eight o'clock at night, which was notoriously late for quiet Wood-sea.

"I can't believe it," Fay repeated, sipping her coffee and frowning thoughtfully out of the window.

"Well, it's true," Kim assured her. "I nearly died when James said it, and I'm sure your cousin found it just as hard to believe."

"Eve?" Fay arched her brows expressively. "Was she there?"

"She came in while we were busy on some highly complicated planning system that's being prepared," Kim told her, "and she wouldn't have been very flattered if she'd seen the face James made when he saw her either! He wasn't very pleased at being interrupted."

Fay grinned. "I thought she went off in an almighty hurry after she spoke to George," she said. "He must have

mentioned that you were working for James. That would have put the cat among the pigeons, as George would realise!

"I don't see why," Kim told her wryly. "She needn't have worried. It wasn't possible for me to sit on his knee, if that was what she anticipated, and we were far too busy anyway."

Fay laughed, sounding rather like George at his most maddening. "Eve is just naturally suspicious and George is just naturally a stirrer."

"A stirrer?"

Fay nodded. "He loves stirring things up. He thoroughly enjoys sitting back and watching what he's started, and he'll do anything to annoy Eve."

Kim frowned over the rather unflattering portrait Fay painted of her brother, but had to admit to the truth, of at least part of it. "Is asking James to be his best man part of annoying Eve, do you think?" she asked. "The idea of George being serious about it worried her more than she cared to admit."

Fay pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I honestly don't know what to think about George lately," she admitted. "He's not behaving at all in character." She looked at Kim curiously. "Are you worried?"

"Yes and no." Kim stirred her coffee with an absent air. "I suppose I am in one way, although I can't honestly think George *is* serious about really getting married. I think he knows we were fooling him and he wants to make us admit it first."

"Mmm, maybe," Fay admitted, "but it's not like George to let anything go on for so long without having to say something about it and giving the game away — that's what makes me think he's up to something."

"Up to something?" Kim echoed. "But what *could* he

be up to, Fay?"

Fay shrugged. "That's what puzzles me," she admitted. "I have a feeling that he and James were planning something. I don't know why," she added hastily when Kim would have spoken, "it's just a feeling I have."

Kim frowned over that. "James? But what on earth could George and James do —" She shrugged impatiently. "Oh, I don't know," she said. "I'm tired of the whole thing."

"Are you going to tell George?"

"That we were only fooling him?" Kim sighed. "I don't know. Perhaps if I say nothing the whole silly business will fizzle out." She was, she felt, being rather optimistic, but she was rather tired of the subject.

One advantage of working for James was that it allowed her time away from George and time to think, so she made the most of it. They were extremely busy and James was a much more demanding employer than George, but most of the work was such routine that she could give at least half her attention to her own problems.

After the first day James had insisted on getting about, although it was obvious that his injured leg gave him a certain amount of pain and as a result he was rather more short-tempered than usual. Kim took little notice of his temperament, for she had long ago learned to cope with employers who were less than sweet-natured. The difference with James Fleming was that he always ended the day by apologising for his shortcomings, a habit Kim found rather disconcerting.

Aunt Bess took a rather biased view of her working for James, however briefly the period was to be, for it was obvious that she saw in George's generous gesture a threat to her plans for Kim and George. Her persistent match-making rather amused Kim and she wondered what her

aunt would have said if she knew that George had asked James about being his best man. Kim had thought it best to keep quiet about it in case Aunt Bess's enthusiasm led her into indiscretion.

Since Kim's arrival, Eve Mellors had visited Covely each day and somehow James managed to inveigle her into leaving again after a very short time, without appearing to be anxious for her to leave. That he was less than enthusiastic about her visits Kim was in no doubt, for he pulled a wry face each time he saw her coming up the front path to the house. Apparently work took precedence even in Eve's case.

"How much longer do you have to stay at home?" she asked him on the third day. "You seem to be getting about on your injured leg, darling, and if you like I could drive you into Woodmouth to the office. I don't even mind getting up at the crack of dawn to do it, if it will help."

It was such an obvious ploy that Kim felt almost sorry for her, especially when it was evident in James' eyes that he had seen through it. "It's not for me to say, Eve," he told her. "Doctor Morgan says I have to stay home at the moment and, as I have no desire to do anything to impede my recovery, I shall do as he says."

"Then surely you shouldn't be working at home," Eve insisted, and sent a condemning look at Kim as if she blamed her for his activity. "You should be resting."

James laughed. "Oh, you know me, I can't rest for long, I get bored to tears. Anyway, I'm not doing much towards it. Kim does all the work while I just make noises like a business man. Kim's the one who's doing all the running about, not me."

"And is no doubt being well paid for it," Eve retorted sharply and with another angry look at Kim.

"Maybe," James agreed quietly, "but she earns it, I've

been pretty hard to get along with the last few days and Kim's coped valiantly."

His praise, Kim felt, was not only exaggerated but embarrassing, and she was sure he had only been so profuse with the idea of taunting Eve. He was, she thought, as bad as George in his own way.

It was during the morning of the fourth day, while she was with Mrs. Pannet getting coffee for herself and James, that Lee decided to visit his uncle. Normally the housekeeper kept the children away from the room when work was in progress, but while she was occupied making coffee and talking to Kim, Lee saw his opportunity and took it.

The first indication Kim had of his whereabouts was when Lee's not inconsiderable lung-power roared a protest and she almost dropped the tray she was picking up. "Good heavens," she exclaimed, looking at Mrs. Pannett half fearfully, "what on earth's going on?"

Mrs. Pannet took a hasty look through the kitchen window to the garden, and shook her head. "It's Lee," she told Kim. "He was out there in the garden with Terry, but he must have sneaked through while we were making coffee."

"But he sounded hurt," Kim remarked as she went out into the hall, followed by the housekeeper.

Mrs. Pannet shook her head. "Maybe he got into some mischief," she guessed, "and Mr. Fleming slapped him for it."

"Oh, that — that brute!" Kim hurried across the hall, her suspicions aroused, and opened the door wide, it was already ajar. "Lee," she said as she looked across the room, "whatever's the matter?"

Her worst suspicions were confirmed when she took in the scene. There was no doubt what had happened, for Lee stood beside the table Kim used as a desk, one hand rub-

bing the seat of his trousers, his bottom lip pouted, half in defiance and half in self-pity so that Kim's soft heart immediately went out to him.

A pile of papers lay scattered over the floor by the table and at the sight of them her heart sank, but she could not see even that as an excuse for smacking Lee and she glared at James Fleming indignantly. "Why did you hit him?" she demanded.

There was an air of silent expectancy in the room and no one spoke or moved for a moment. Mrs. Pannet hovered anxiously in the background, James sat perfectly still on the long settee, too still, his eyes stormily dark, while Lee, the cause of it all, looked from one to the other with more interest than apprehension, although Kim refused to recognise it.

"Take Lee out, will you, Mrs. Pannet?" James asked at last, dangerously quiet, and Kim bit on her lip as she stood the coffee tray on a table.

"Yes, sir." The housekeeper held out a hand and Lee went across to her, reluctantly, even Kim had to admit that. Although he had been the one who got slapped he was probably the one least affected by the aftermath.

"James —" He looked at his uncle hopefully, but met with a frown that would have discouraged anyone, and Kim found fresh fuel for her anger because he had not been allowed to apologise, if that had been his intention.

As the door closed behind them Kim waited for the storm to break, but instead James merely inclined his head towards the scattered papers on the floor. "You'd better start putting those in order again," he told her, reaching for the coffee pot. "I'll leave your coffee in the pot until you've finished, then it won't get cold."

So that was it, Kim thought; he meant to pay her back for her temerity by making her wait for her coffee. She was

very tempted to argue with him about it, but she thought that was probably what he expected her to do and she would not give him the satisfaction, so she stooped down beside the table and began gathering up the jumbled pages. Although her fingers trembled and she was so angry she felt like crying, she refused to let him see how she felt.

The pages were of a long and very complicated report and they were, as yet, unnumbered, so that sorting them was a long and tedious job and one which she would normally have complained bitterly about. This time, however she realised that any murmur from her would only justify his smacking Lee, and so she worked silently and uncomplainingly.

To make matters worse she was obliged to spend most of her time either on her knees or stooped round his side of the table while he sat quietly sipping his coffee and watching her. It would have been difficult for him to help, she realised, but he could at least have offered to sort the pages into order instead of leaving it all to her, and she hated the way he watched her.

There was, she thought resentfully, something of the air of a feudal lord about him as he sat there, as if he enjoyed watching her grovelling on the floor at his feet and just waiting for her to do something wrong.

Her imagination was running riot by the time she had gathered and sorted the last of the papers and she straightened up thankfully, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling. "Everything's in order," she told him, and dumped the pile down heavily on the table.

He nodded briefly. "Help yourself to coffee."

"No, thank you." She stood by the table, stiffly resentful, her manner as haughty as if she was the offended one.

"Sit down."

The order was brief and impatient and she was very

tempted to refuse that too. "I —" she began, but he waved an impatient hand.

"Sit down and pour yourself some coffee," he told her, "and don't stand on your dignity." Reluctantly Kim obeyed, seeing nothing else for it, short of walking out altogether, and that would no doubt upset George.

"I wasn't aware that I was," she said shortly as she helped herself to coffee.

He raised beseeching eyes to heaven. "Huh !"

Kim swallowed her drink with difficulty, almost choking on it. "I've sorted the report and I've taken coffee, both without comment," she told him, "so I don't see that you have any cause for complaint, Mr. Fleming, if you have I suggest you see Mr. Daley. I'm *his* employee, not yours, and it was *his* idea that I work for you."

"I remember," he admitted, and seemed to be finding the fact amusing. "You were shanghaied into it, weren't you?" He eyed her for a moment, speculatively. "I suppose all this — this showing off is to let me know you disapprove of my smacking Lee?" he suggested.

"There was no need to smack him," Kim retorted. "It's hardly likely he knocked the papers over deliberately."

"You weren't hew.," he told her, "so you couldn't know, could you?"

Kim glared at him, still convinced he had been unduly harsh with Lee and determined to let him know it. "You're a — a sadist, a — a monster," she told him darkly, "and I certainly wouldn't let you near any child of mine!"

For some reason he seemed to find that idea even more amusing and smiled widely, his eyes now far more tolerant than angry which did nothing to placate her. "You know even less about children than I do," he informed her, "and that's little enough, heaven knows. If you must have it in detail — I told Lee he wasn't allowed in here while we were

working and that offended his sense of liberty, so he decided to argue, thinking I was immobile. When I told him off for answering back he retaliated by carefully tapping at the edge of that pile of papers until it toppled off the edge, exactly as he intended."

"Child-like," Kim decided, refusing to admit he was right. "And you hit him."

He looked at her for a moment, as much exasperated as amused. "I turned him round," he admitted patiently, "and administered one fairly hefty whack to his seat, certainly not hard enough to warrant the yell he gave and which brought you running in here full of righteous indignation." He eyed her steadily. "I suppose you would have smiled benignly?" he suggested sarcastically, and Kim flushed but did not answer. "With *your* temper?" he added. "It's unlikely, Kim, so don't try to be such a paragon of patience, it's not very convincing."

"Oh, you —"

"Shut up and let's get on with this report," he interrupted with a grin, "or I'll serve you the same as I did Lee."

Seeing nothing else for it, Kim did as he said, although she was sorely tempted. It was not long before she was due to finish work for the day that another crisis loomed and both she and James looked up curiously when, after a brief knock, Mrs. Pannet appeared in the doorway. James sighed resignedly.

"What is it now, Mrs. Pannet? A crisis in the kitchen?"

"No, sir." It was obvious she was reluctant to tell him whatever it was worried her, and Kim felt suddenly apprehensive for no reason she could think of. "It — it's Lee, Mr. Fleming. He's gone."

"Gone?" He looked more annoyed than worried and Kim felt herself automatically preparing to defend the child again. James sighed wearily. "Oh, he's probably gone down

on the sea wall again, Mrs. Pannet. Don't panic, he never goes far."

Mrs. Pannet shook her head, looking more worried than ever. "No, he's not, sir. I've been down there with Terry and looked, and he's nowhere in sight."

"Oh." A frown replaced the resignation. "*Now* where the devil has he got to?"

Kim looked at James enquiringly. "Could *I* go and look for him?" she suggested. "Mrs. Pannet would have been hindered to a certain extent by having Terry with her, and I might do better on my own."

"That's just what the little monster wants," James told her wryly. "Everyone running around after him in a panic. He's a real little exhibitionist, that one."

"It probably runs in the family," Kim remarked tartly, "but the fact remains that he's missing and it gets dark quite early this time of year. Aren't you even slightly worried about him?"

He looked at her for a second with a brow raised, then glanced down at his plaster-encased foot and leg. "What do you suggest I do," he asked, "clump up and down the sea wall like Long John Silver?"

"Well, let *me* go," Kim insisted. "I know my way around Woodsea well enough now, and someone may have seen

James sighed and looked across at the housekeeper. "All right, Mrs. Pannet, you'd better go and keep an eye on Terry. We don't want her running off too, it might be catching. Miss Anders'll go and find Lee."

Kim waited until the door closed behind the housekeeper. "You realise *why* he's run off, don't you?" she asked, and he smiled ruefully.

"Go on," he encouraged, "blame me."

"It was you," Kim insisted. "You smacked him."

"I'll wallop the living daylights out of him when you bring him back," he informed her sternly, "broken leg or not."

"Oh, you — you brute !" Kim glared at him helplessly. "I shan't *bring* him back to you, I'll — I'll keep him with me where you can't hurt him, you — monster ! "

James got to his feet only with difficulty, the heavy plaster upsetting his balance so that he hung on to the end of the sideboard for support, grinning down at her now that he was his normal height again. "The original wicked uncle, as I told you once before," he reminded her. "Go on, you little angel of mercy, go and round up the stray lamb. I promise not to give him his just deserts."

Kim flushed, not only because of the jibe, but some expression in his eyes that set the pulse in her temple throbbing wildly. "I — I don't trust you," she told him.

"And I don't blame you." He was perfectly solemn except for his eyes, and Kim lowered her own as she walked towards the door.

She had to pass him first on her way, but she was unprepared for the hand that closed round her arm as she passed and brought her to a halt, her heart pounding erratically. "I — I must go and find Lee," she told him, trying hard to steady her voice. The grip on her arm did not ease. "Please, James."

"It *does* please James," he told her, and laughed softly, drawing her easily into his one free arm, seeking her mouth gently but firmly. She was stiff against him for a second, then gradually she relaxed until she could scarcely tell his heartbeat from her own, except that hers was so much more rapid. He held her for what seemed like an eternity, but could only have been a second or two, then his laugh sounded soft and deep against her ear. "I thought you were in a hurry to find Lee," he teased, "and what would George

say if he knew?"

Kim shook herself free, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling angrily, then without another word, she walked to the door and banged it shut behind her, her thoughts chaotic as she left the house.

She was unsure where she should start looking for the errant Lee, since Mrs. Pannet had already covered the sea wall, but look she must and quickly before it got dark. James was right, to a certain extent, of course; it was unlikely that Lee had gone very far, for he had a built-in sense of self-preservation like most children, but he was also a seasoned absconder and he probably knew of places that Kim had never even guessed at.

She remembered the cove where they had so very nearly come to grief the day of the boat race and her heart sank in case Lee remembered it too. Not knowing where else to start, she walked the length of the sea wall, keeping a look out all the way, and went down on to the sandy beach. The wind blowing in off the sea was already quite chill although the day had been warm, and the short October evening was drawing in rapidly, so that Kim shivered when she thought of Lee being alone and probably too childishly stubborn to go home.

It was all James' fault, she told herself, shrugging off the persistent memory of that kiss; he should not have been so harsh with the boy and then he would not have run away yet again.

The tide was still out, but only just, for the water was rapidly foaming and rolling up the incline towards the cliff, leaving only a narrow strip of sand still uncovered. Kim eyed the advancing tide dubiously, but the thought of Lee being there in the cove, small and frightened, decided her and she started across the damp cold sand, her eyes flicking uneasily to the approaching sea.

The yellow-sanded beach looked bleak and desolate in the dying light, and not a bit as it had in the bright sunshine as the last time she saw it. The dark grotesque shapes of the rocks strode across the narrow cove to the sea and the towering background of the cliffs gave it a close, unfriendly feeling that made her shudder.

"Lee?" she called out, although she had little hope of hearing an answer. Only the threatening whisper of the advancing sea shushed her into silence and she glanced hastily round the tiny cove in desperation. "Lee !" Her voice echoed strangely off the cliff face and she thought she heard a faint sound other than the swishing tide. "Lee, where are you?"

It was a sound, she was sure now, the faint sound of a small voice and while she still looked around the cove helplessly a little figure emerged from behind the concealing rocks. "Oh, Lee !" She ran to him, the damp sand dragging at her feet, and he looked at her with wide, half defiant eyes as she knelt down beside him. "Where on earth did you think you were going? You know this cove gets cut off at high tide, you'd have been stranded here all night."

"I like it here," Lee informed her, a little sulkily, she had to admit.

"Well, you can't stay here," Kim insisted, getting to her feet again. "Now come along quickly before the tide cuts off our escape."

"I —" He started to argue, and for a moment Kim felt some of James' exasperation.

"Lee, come *along!*"

He came then, but very reluctantly, and they made their way across the coldness of the sand again, Kim holding tight to his hand. The strip of dry exit was already much smaller than she had anticipated and she unconsciously hurried him the last few yards.

"Up you go." She helped him up on to the sea wall and prepared to follow.

"No !" His cry of despair startled her so that she almost toppled backwards.

"What's wrong?" she asked, staring at him in the dim light.

"I left my boat." He started to scramble down off the wall again and Kim forcibly pushed him back.

"Well, it'll have to stay until tomorrow," she told him. "You can't go back now."

Tears rolled down his grubby face and his eyes looked up at her reproachfully. "It's my new boat," he wailed. "I don't want to lose it, Kim, I don't want to lose it."

Hastily Kim glanced back over her shoulder at the dark, white-edged waves rolling up the sand to close the gap, then down at Lee's tearful, appealing face. "All right," she told him, "but you stay here and I'll run back for it, promise?"

Lee nodded and she went down once again on to the cold, unwelcoming sand, walking as quickly as it allowed her to to the tiny gap still left, realising as she went that she did not know for certain just where he had left his precious boat.

She tried to remember exactly where he had emerged from the rocks and thought she had the right place when she toiled up the beach following as best she could her own footsteps in the sand, although it was difficult to distinguish them, it was so dark now.

She looked around hastily, horribly aware of the persistent warning from the sea behind her, and only when she was prepared to go back without the boat did she spot a white sail lying on one of the rocks and hastily grabbed the toy and ran.

She ran back round the screening rocks and felt a cold,

helpless sensation in her stomach when she saw that the narrow strip of sand was already awash. She stared at it in dismay as the water frothed and curled at the foot of the cliff, shallow as yet but deepening with every wave that rolled in as fast as she could drag her feet through the clinging sand.

She could just distinguish the shadowy little figure of Lee up on the sea wall as she hastily slipped off her shoes and paddled through the swirling water, the oncoming tide reaching much further to her knees than she anticipated, and she clenched her teeth on the stark coldness of it.

"Kim !" She heard Lee's cry of surprise as her foot caught on a polished stone, hidden under the sand and water, and she was sent sprawling full length.

Her own cry, she thought, would not have been heard by anyone but Lee and she sought to reassure him as she shook the salt water from her eyes and struggled to her feet. "Lee," she called, "I'm all right, don't be —" the rest of her words were snatched away as another wave came in, bigger than the others and swept her off her feet again while she was still unsteady.

She felt herself buffeted against the hardness of the cliff and sought to get her breath to call and reassure Lee again. She managed to get to her feet after a moment or two and clung to one of the rocks, soaked through and shivering uncontrollably.

"Lee !" She looked up on to the sea wall where he had stood and could see no sign of him. "Lee!"

Her voice echoed chillingly from the cliff face and she tried to stop her teeth from chattering as she moved, cautiously, through the advancing tide to the sea wall, finding it far more difficult than she feared, though she clung on grimly.

It was almost completely dark now and she could see no

other living soul along the promenade, only the lights from Linwood, warm and inviting, shone down the drive from the house, and she turned towards them instinctively.

She realised, as she squelched her way along the gravel, that she had lost her shoes during her ducking, and that she must look like some weird creature from the deep dripping water as she walked, her clothes clinging wetly and her hair like tangled seaweed flopping over her face.

She rang the bell and it seemed like an eternity before anyone came, then, before she could say a word, she was suddenly whirling round and round as if she was a spinning top and everything went black.

She opened her eyes to see George's anxious face looking at her and Fay brushing him aside as she came and bent over her, smiling reassuringly. "Kim !" Her voice sounded oddly distant at first and then Kim's head cleared and she tried to smile.

"I'm horribly wet," she stated.

"What on earth happened to you?" It was George's voice, unusually serious and edged with anxiety. "You surely didn't jump in fully clothed, did you, darling?"

"Of course she didn't," Fay retorted. "And don't start questioning the poor girl yet, she isn't up to it."

Kim struggled to sit up. "I'm all right, really, Fay."

"You're sure?" Fay's eyes were curious, but she did not ask questions.

"I'm all right," Kim insisted, "and I'm sorry to have made such a mess, Fay." She looked at the water all over the carpet and the damp patches on the settee where she had been laid. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Fay told her. "We weren't concerned about the mess, only with what had happened to you." She thrust a steaming cup into her hands. "Here, drink this, as hot as you can, it'll help."

Kim sniffed the fragrant brew curiously. "What is it?"

"A drop of the hard stuff," George informed her, before Fay could reply. "Drink it up like a good girl, it'll do you good and get rid of the shivers."

Kim shrugged her shoulders, noticing that her wet coat had been removed and she was wrapped in a brightly coloured blanket. "I was frozen," she admitted. "The water was icy."

"Which makes it all the more odd for you to go for a clip in your clothes," George said, despite Fay's discouraging frown. "What *were* you up to, my sweet?"

Kim raised wide eyes suddenly, remembering Lee, and feeling horribly guilty because she had almost forgotten him. "Oh no, I'd forgotten! How awful of me. You haven't spotted Lee Fleming anywhere have you?"

"One of James' brood?" George eyed her curiously. "No, why?"

"He wandered off and I came out to find him," Kim explained. "I found him in the little cove below the cliffs. Luckily my first guess was right or he'd have been cut off by the tide, poor little soul."

"But where is he?" Fay looked concerned and Kim shook her head.

"He's O.K. I left him on the sea wall and went back to look for his boat, the tide washed me off my feet and he was gone when I managed to climb out again."

"He didn't come here," Fay told her, obviously worried.

"Oh, I shouldn't worry about him," George remarked cheerfully. "The callous little wretch has probably gone home and forgotten all about you by now."

"Oh no, he wouldn't," Kim protested, wondering how true it was. "I expect he was frightened and he ran home, but he'd tell James, he wouldn't forget all about me."

George arched doubtful brows, smiling at her insistence.

"Oh, they're real little angels, according to you," he told her.

"They're nice children," Kim insisted, feeling a glow from the brandy-spiced coffee. "You're as bad as James."

"Much worse," George averred with a wicked grin, and Kim wondered, irrelevantly, why both he and James insisted on claiming wickedness as a virtue.

"I wish you wouldn't try to — to out-villain James Fleming," she told him. "I'm sure you wouldn't be as harsh as he is if you had them."

"Heaven forbid the situation ever arises," George declared, horrified, "I'd leap off the sea wall in desperation."

"Oh, George !" She felt worried anew about Lee, and rather tearful, probably from a combination of brandy and reaction to her ducking.

"I'm sorry, my sweet." He came over and took her hands in his, raising her fingers to his lips. "I shouldn't tease you when you're worried. Shall I put your mind at rest and ring James to see if the little monster has gone home under his own steam?"

"Oh, would you, please, George?" Kim looked at him appealingly. "For one thing James will be worried by now if he *isn't* home, and I promised to bring him back."

George smiled wryly. "Then I'd better set everyone's mind at rest and find out," he told her, and turned away with the intention of ringing James Fleming.

"Oh, George !" Kim called as he reached the door. "I — I don't want to be a nuisance, but Aunt Bess will be wondering why I haven't come home yet, could you —"

George nodded. "O.K., darling, I'll ring her first."

"Thank you, George."

He grinned at her slowly. "I adore you," he told her, "and I'm prepared to do anything for you, you name it and I'll do it, my sweet, there's only one thing." Kim looked

uncertain, half smiling, unsure if he was serious. "You think more of James' monsters than you do of me, **I'm** quite sure you do, and I should be madly jealous."

Kim smiled, looking childishly appealing and slightly unreal, with strands of wet hair clinging to her head, its usual fair colour darkened and tossed wildly, tangling about her face, her skin still shiny from the cold sea water. Her eyes were big and brightly glowing with the effects of the brandy and the tears that still hovered not too far behind her smile.

"You have no cause to be jealous of anyone," she told him lightly. "Bless you, George."

"Ai= !" He wrinkled his nose at her delightedly. "You look beautiful, weird but beautiful, like some fabulous creature from twenty thousand fathoms." He turned his head sharply as the telephone rang in the hall. "Hello, somebody beat me to it — now who can that be, I wonder?"

They heard him answer, both of them listening unashamedly, then a listening silence for a second or two. "Whoa!" he told whoever was at the other end of the line. "Don't panic, old boy, hold your horses."

He listened again for a moment, while Fay looked at Kim curiously, a frown between her brows, her lips forming the words, "Who is it?" and Kim shook her head, although she had a strange sense of certainty who it was.

"She's here with Fay and me," George said next. "Wet and miserable and just about conscious, but she's here."

Kim looked startled, flicking an uneasy glance at Fay, wondering why George had seen fit to make it sound as if she was much worse hurt than she was. "Now don't panic," he insisted. "You can't do anything if you come and I don't want a one-legged man on my hands as well. I've told you she's O.K., in fact I've just been saying she looks like a rather gorgeous creature from the deep." Another pause.

"I'll bring her home, right now. If you'll let her auntie know via your Mrs. Whatsit, she won't have the flutters when we arrive. Thanks, old boy."

"James !" Fay confirmed Kim's own certainty and her eyes were questioning when she looked at her.

"I imagine so," Kim agreed non-committally.

"I wonder why he rang here," Fay mused, still speculating, it was obvious, "unless he thought you'd brought Lee here first."

"Perhaps Lee went home and — and maybe he told him some exaggerated tale about my ducking," Kim suggested, not meeting her eyes, and Fay nodded.

"Most likely," she agreed. "We'll soon know."

"It was poor old James going slightly berserk," George announced a few seconds later, and with evident satisfaction, "because he thought Kim had perished in the deep."

"And you made it sound as if I had," Kim accused.

George smiled blandly. "I don't think I did, darling, but it *was* his monster's fault you went into the drink, he should do some of the worrying, it's only fair."

Kim felt a retort on her lips but bit it back hastily when she caught Fay's gaze on her again, curious and speculative. "I'm glad Lee went home, anyway," she said.

"Oh, he went home," George assured her with a grin, "hence James' panic stations. He told James you was drowned, and you can imagine the state poor old James was in after that, him being more or less helpless and all. The mood he's in now, that infant probably won't sit down for a week."

"If he —" Kim began, but George shook his head at her.

"Oh, you can't blame him, darling, be fair."

"What — what made him ring here?" Kim asked, curious despite her fears for Lee.

George shrugged. "Where else ?" he asked. "He wanted

me to go down and find you, see what *had* happened and break it to him gently. He was even coming down here himself to look for you until I told him you were all in one piece."

he spansks Lee," Kim said darkly, trying to ignore the concern for her own safety, "I'll — I'll *hit* him ! "

George eyed her for a moment, his own gaze mock apprehensive. "I believe you would too," he declared. "I hadn't realised just what a little militant you are, my darling. I'd better give James the tip in case you set about him. Forewarned is forearmed."

"It was because he smacked Lee this morning," Kim told him, "that he ran away."

"Quite frankly, Kim," Fay's quiet voice intervened before George could answer, "I think that little boy *needs* firm handling, and I'm quite sure James isn't as bad as you make him out to be. Have you ever seen him smack the children?"

Kim shook her head, reluctantly honest. "No," she admitted, "but — but he's always so horrid about them and he's always threatening to beat them, especially Lee."

Fay smiled wryly, glancing at her brother as she spoke. "Like someone else I know," she told Kim, "I rather think James is more talk than action."

George looked affronted at the accusation and demanded an explanation. "I know you're sniping at me," he told Fay, "and I want to know why, in fact I *demand* to know why."

"Oh, you know very well why," Fay retorted, smiling, and winked an eye at Kim.

"No, I don't," George declared, his expression as innocent as a child's. "Do you know what I'm being accused of, Kim?"

Kim shook her head. "I — I don't know," she said warily,

wishing Fay had not chosen this particular time **to** raise the subject that had been bothering her. She glanced hastily at the mantel clock. "**I—I think I** should go, Fay. Aunt Bess will be expecting me."

"Yes, of course." Fay got to her feet, not pursuing the subject, much to Kim's relief. "George will run you home in the car."

"My pleasure," George assured her. "Keep that blanket on and you won't get cold. Come on, my beautiful mermaid."

It took only a minute or two to drive along the sea wall to Summer House and Kim wondered what state her aunt was in if James Fleming had relayed his impression of her accident to her. Aunt Bess was inclined to fuss at the best of times, and thinking Kim half-drowned she would probably be in a near panic.

There were lights showing in both houses and Kim objected when George insisted on carrying her into the house as if she was incapable of walking. "George, put me down, please," she insisted. "**I** can walk quite well on my own."

"Oh, but you make such a gorgeous body," George told her outrageously, "it seems a pity not to make the most of it, and —" his eyes looked down at her wickedly, "just think what a treat it'll be for the neighbours !"

The neighbours, Kim realised as he carried her into the front garden of Summer House, included James Fleming, and she heard the front door of Covely being opened at the same time as Aunt Bess admitted them, twittering anxiously.

Either George did not notice the neighbouring door open, or he decided to ignore it, for he gave no sign, but carried her straight into the house and deposited her on the settee in her aunt's sitting-room.

"**Oh**, you poor dear !" Aunt Bess exclaimed, seeing her

tangled hair and the scratches and bruises on her arms and legs where the rocks had left their mark. "What on earth happened to you?"

"She's had a rather nasty ducking," George informed her aunt, as if he knew all about the incident first hand, "but she's not badly hurt, Mrs. Keeler." He stood looking down at Kim, a smile on his face that puzzled her. "The sooner we're married and I can take her firmly in hand," he declared, blithely uncaring of the effect of his words, "the better for everybody."

"Married — oh, oh yes, of course." Aunt Bess did not know whether to look surprised or pleased and succeeded only in looking vaguely outraged as she stared at him, while Kim shivered suddenly even in the warmth of the blanket, her hands curled into her palms as she recalled the last few moments before she left Covely to look for Lee.

It was high time, she thought wildly as she remembered the way James had kissed her, that she settled things with George once and for all — one way or another.

CHAPTER IX

FEELING perfectly capable of working next morning, Kim got up with the idea of carrying on as usual and going next door to help James. She was, it was true, slightly stiff and there were bruises on her arms and legs, also a faint one on her right cheek, but otherwise she felt none the worse for her ducking. Aunt Bess, however had other ideas, and she objected most strongly when Kim appeared at breakfast ready for work.

"Mr. Daley would be very angry if he knew," she warned, as if that would be the ultimate deterrent, and Kim shook her head, smiling.

"George doesn't know how to be very angry," she told her aunt. "He'd leave it entirely to me, he knows I've enough sense not to do anything silly like working when I'm not up to it."

"You were silly enough to go back for that child's toy when you knew you'd very likely be cut off by the tide," Aunt Bess retorted, with uncharacteristic sharpness. "And if you insist on being foolhardy, Kim, I shall ring Mr. Daley and tell him. He *is* your boss, after all."

Kim laughed, unable to resist the faintly shocked expression she knew it would cause. "If you ring George, Aunt Bess, I shall tell him myself what I intend to do and you'll see, he's far less worried than you think and he's, *quite* unlikely to be angry. He's not James, you know."

Why she had made that comparison, she had no idea, and she saw her aunt's eyes narrow speculatively when she looked at her. Lately she had been far less friendly towards James Fleming, it seemed to Kim. "You think Mr.

Fleming will be angry?" she asked, and Kim nodded, wishing already that she had not brought James into it.

"He's the bad-tempered one, not George," she declared, seeking to deter any further speculation. "I've no doubt he'll be very sarcastic about women who go back to fetch toy boats when it's obvious they'll be caught by the tide. It'll be an opportunity he'll find too good to miss."

Convinced as she had been that he would be only scornful of her stupidity, she was surprised to see that it was neither scorn nor anger she saw in James' eyes when she walked into the room, but some expression that made her hastily lower her own gaze and catch her breath as her pulse began to race, erratically uneven.

He was on his feet when she came in and not sitting on the settee as she had expected, and she felt it would have been easier to face him if she had not been made so conscious of his height and her own feeling of vulnerability. His back was to the window, but even with the light behind him, the pale grey eyes were just as disconcerting. She noticed too that this morning he was using a stick to help him stand, as if he had every intention of staying on his feet.

"Good morning."

He did not immediately answer, but studied her for a moment in silence, a nerve-racking silence that Kim found hard to bear. "How're you feeling?" He did not bother to return her formal greeting.

"I'm quite all right, thank you."

His eyes went unerringly to the faint mark on her face and he frowned. "You've bruised your face." It might have been a hideous disfigurement from his tone, and she half-smiled, one finger touching lightly on the faint dark mark.

"I'll live," she told him, "and it's not a very bad bruise."

He left his place by the window then and clumped heavily

across the room, far less clumsy in the plaster than he had been a week ago. He came and stood in front of her, and started that erratic, uneasy heartbeat again. "Do you feel like facing a day's work?"

"Yes, of course." She raised her eyes, but almost immediately lowered them again. "I feel fine and — and anyway, today is my last day here, isn't it?"

"Is it? I don't know how long George committed you for — anyway, Miss Norton will be back next week."

"George told me five days," Kim said, "and today is the fifth day."

"Is it really?" He looked slightly surprised and she suspected he was teasing her, though he seemed serious enough. "It doesn't seem that long." He arched a brow at her, inviting comment. "Not to me anyway."

Kim refused to be drawn. "As it's my last day here," she said, "we may as well get down to some work and do *as much as possible*."

"You'll be glad to get back to George?" He still stood in front of her, evidently not sharing her sense of urgency regarding the work, and Kim chanced another brief glance upwards.

"I'll be glad to get back to George," she agreed quietly, and wondered, as she said it, how true it was.

He did not answer for a moment, but merely stood looking down at her, with that disconcerting gaze playing havoc with her senses. "Of course," he said, as if he understood perfectly, "in the circumstances it's natural, I suppose."

"Circumstances?" Her puzzlement was genuine for the moment, for she was not, she realised, thinking very clearly at present.

He arched an expressive brow at her uncertainty. "You *are* going to marry him, aren't you?"

"Oh!" She blinked, wondering how much he knew of

the truth about her and George. He was pretty shrewd and he was also quite friendly with Fay, so it was quite feasible that he was less in the dark than he appeared. "I — I — yes, I suppose I am," she admitted.

"You *suppose* you are?" His expression was more like its normal self now, amused and slightly mocking, and Kim flushed when he laughed shortly. "You don't sound very sure about it — poor old George."

Her fingers curled into her palms as the familiar resentment reared its head. "I don't see why it concerns you what George and I do," she told him.

It was inevitable, of course, that her rising anger encouraged rather than deterred him, and he shook his head at her. "Oh, but it does," he reminded her. "You forget I'm to be George's best man on the big day, and that gives me a sort of vested interest in the affair." The light eyes held hers steadily, though she longed to look away. "You'll make a beautiful bride," he added softly, one finger gently tracing the faint darkness on her cheek. "Even with a bruised cheek."

Kim half-closed her eyes under the almost hypnotic touch, trying vainly to steady the pulse that hammered away at her temple. "I — I hope I shan't have a bruised face when — when that — happens." It was really very difficult to find words, she thought, and she should have been more honest. There was no point in keeping up the pretence, except that she did not see why he should be the one she confessed to, *mien* she did.

"Oh?" He looked surprised. "I rather thought George was in something of a hurry. Not," he added softly, "that I blame him, of course."

"You — you must have misunderstood," she told him, but felt horribly uncertain for, knowing how wildly impulsive George could be, it was just possible that he had made ar-

rangements he had not told her about, and that James was better informed than she was herself, and at the thought of it, she almost panicked.

"You frightened the life out of him last night," he told her, unaware of the turmoil in her mind as she thought madly of what possible plans George could have made and not seen fit to tell her about.

"There was no need for anyone to be *that* worried," she said, steadying her voice with difficulty, and remembering too that by George's account, it had been he and not George who had been frightened to death. George, of course, was prone to exaggerate.

The light eyes flicked over her curiously. "I've never heard the true whys and wherefores of it," he told her. "Suppose you enlighten me first hand. I only have Lee's rather garbled version, and according to that you were headed straigh for Davy Jones' locker."

Reminded of Lee, Kim immediately thought of the threatened spanking and she looked at him steadily, her eyes dark with suspicion. "Where *is* Lee this morning?" she asked. "Is he all right? You didn't —"

Her automatic suspicion had its usual effect and she saw the gleam in his eyes of mingled exasperation and amusement. "He's fine," he told her, a hint of a drawl in his voice. "He's black and blue, of course, and he won't sit down for a week or so, but he'll recover."

"Oh, you didn't —" She realised, too late, that he was taunting her and bit her lip hastily on the abuse she had been ready to hurl at him.

"It's only what you expected, isn't it?" he asked matter-of-factly. "You know I believe in spare the rod and spoil the child, so you shouldn't be shocked if I come up to expectations."

"Don't — don't, please !"

He looked at her steadily, the amusement giving way to resignation. "I'm only trying to live up to your picture of me," he told her. "That's what you want to believe, isn't it?"

"No — no, of course not." Kim shook her head, feeling, for no good reason, as if she would like to burst into tears. It was a ridiculous reaction of course, and probably stemmed from her experience last night. Perhaps Aunt Bess was right, she should have stayed home for today.

For a second longer he stood looking down at her, almost as if he suspected how she felt and regretted his part in it. "Kim —" He put out his one free hand to her and Kim felt herself holding her breath, but before he could move or speak again, a soft tap on the door broke the spell and Eve Mellors came into the room.

James' expression when he saw her could have been termed less than welcoming, but it was only fleeting and he managed to smile by the time Eve registered anything of his expression.

"James darling, good morning." She ignored Kim as she usually did, and tiptoed to kiss James on his chin. "You look very much better, darling, how do you feel?"

"Much better," he agreed, his eyes following Kim when she walked over and sat herself down at the table that did duty as a desk.

"I'm glad to hear it. Perhaps we can get back to normal before too long now, hmm?" Eve sank gracefully into one of the armchairs and crossed her slim legs, every movement studied as it always was with her. She pouted reproach at him. "I miss you, James, though I'm sure you won't tell me the same, will you?"

"Eve dear, I've seen you every day since I've been home, and most evenings too, so I can hardly think you've missed me that much." He sounded patient rather than teasing,

and patient only with an effort, so that Kim wondered if Eve would detect it too, but apparently she did not.

"It's not the same, darling, is it?" she complained, still pouting. "There's always someone around." A swift resentful look encompassed Kim, which Kim feigned not to notice.

James sighed, whether in regret or impatience it was difficult to decide, though there was little doubt which interpretation Eve would put on it. "Actually, Eve, we have quite a lot of work to get through this morning, so if you could — I'm sorry," he added when she got up from her chair, her expression cross but resigned.

"Oh, it's all right," she allowed. "I know you have your wretched work to get on with, though why you can't delegate some of it to some of your employees, I don't know. I frequently do, and I'm still holding my own."

"Maybe," James agreed wryly, "but running a business isn't exactly like being a name at the top of a fashion column, Eve dear, and anyway, *I enjoy* work."

As if she suspected the reason for his enjoyment Eve glanced over at Kim, acknowledging her existence at last, though obviously reluctantly. "I hear you made quite a drama for yourself last night, Miss Anders," she said.

Kim looked dismayed at being made the centre of attention, especially as James Fleming seemed to be watching her with more than a little curiosity. "It was — it was far less serious than it could have been," she told her, wondering how much George had dramatised the incident for his cousin's benefit. "I went to Linwood because — because it was nearest and I felt rather — rather dizzy."

"So I 'gather," Eve declared wryly. "You were dripping wet and throwing a faint, so I was told."

It was doubtful, Kim thought, if George had worded it like that, but she saw James' brows rise at the information.

"It — it wasn't quite like that," she objected, but mildly. It was no use getting into an argument 'with Eve Mellors, and anyway, she felt rather headacheey suddenly and not a bit like starting an argument she would most likely lose.

"You just never learn, do you?" Kim looked puzzled and Eve curled her lip derisively. "You should have remembered about that tide," she told her. "You've been caught there before, only this time there was no one to rescue you, was there?"

"Kim went after Lee," James told her, before Kim could reply, "it wasn't her fault this time."

His defence, Kim realised, only made Eve more angry and she wished he had not done it. She could defend herself against Eve Mellors' spiteful tongue without his help. "**I** was silly enough **to go back** for Lee's boat," she admitted. "*It was* my own fault, I admit it."

James looked at her curiously and only half believing. "You did what?" he asked, and shook his head without waiting for an answer. "So that's what happened — you went back for a toy boat ! Of all the — you crazy little idiot, didn't you realise what a chance you were taking?"

Kim flushed. His support had been bad enough, his condemnation was even more unacceptable, especially in front of Eve Mellors. "All right, **I** should have known better," she told him, her argument with him alone now, "but I thought **I** had time to go back, at least before the water got too deep. A few inches wouldn't have hurt me, it just took me longer than I anticipated to find the boat, that's all. Then **I** stepped on a slippery rock or a stone or something, and fell."

"And you lost the boat anyway," he said wryly, "so you took a chance for nothing."

Kim clenched her hands tightly, getting up from the

desk, her eyes sparkling and brilliantly dark blue as she faced him. She refused to be made to look small in front of Eve Mellors and, what was worse, she felt annoyingly tearful again. The latter decided her. "I'm sorry about the boat," she told him, her voice trembling despite her efforts to steady it, "but I'll replace it with another as soon as I can find one. In the meantime, Mr. Fleming, I think it might be best if I left. I'll explain to Mr. Daley," she added, stiffly formal.

She was aware, as she walked across the room to the door, that two pairs of eyes followed her progress, and she wondered which held most surprise. There was no doubt which was most pleased to see her go and, at the moment, her biggest regret was having conceded victory to Eve Mellors — that and the tears that rolled warmly down her cheeks as if they would never stop.

Kim had to admit to being puzzled by George's attitude. He was obviously not pleased because she had walked out on James, in fact it seemed to upset him almost, as if it was the last thing he either expected or wanted.

"I promised he should have you for at least a week," he told her, "and it's barely five days."

"It *is* five days, and it's five days too long," Kim declared, not only puzzled but annoyed by his attitude. "You had no right to lend me to him like an — an eskimo !"

"Eskimo ?" It was George's turn to look puzzled.

"Wives," Kim explained vaguely. "They used to lend their — oh, never mind." She could see herself getting into even deeper water there and she thought she detected a wicked gleam in his eyes. "You should have asked me first and let me say whether I was willing to go or not."

George looked contrite, but still ready to argue. "And you'd have said no," he declared, "wouldn't you?"

"Quite possibly," Kim agreed, "but you should still have asked me."

He sighed, deeply and exaggeratedly, running disrupting fingers through his long hair so that it fell, very attractively, over one brow. "I thought I was being very noble and self-sacrificing," he told her plaintively.

"But why?" Kim asked. "You don't owe James a — a favour, do you? Why did you have to send *me* to work for him?"

"And why do you and James have to quarrel all the time?" he asked. "I didn't realise I was causing such a lot of trouble by sending you to James for a few days, but you're such a couple of hotheads I — I despair of you."

He was in what Kim privately termed his poetic mood, when he looked as if he had been abandoned by the whole world, and Kim thought he knew exactly how Victorian and romantic he looked as he sat, shoulders drooped despondently, on the arm of a chair. The velvet jacket he wore, high-collared and slightly flared, and the flowing cravat, combined with the slightly dishevelled long hair, was not only effective but well-nigh irresistible, and Kim, almost instinctively, put out a hand to touch the bowed head.

"George!" He did not speak or move, only sighed again. "I wouldn't have walked out on him," she explained, "only — well, first Eve arrived and then James started being sarcastic at my expense and I was feeling a bit weepy anyway. It's reaction, I suppose."

He looked up, momentarily puzzled, forgetful as only George could be, then he remembered. "Oh, my darling Kim!" He stood up, running his fingers through his hair again. "I never even asked how you were and you were half drowned last night. I *am* so sorry, my sweet, please forgive me."

The threatening tears still glistened in her eyes, but his profuse and dramatic apology made her smile. "Of course I forgive you," she told him. "I'm perfectly all right, George, just a bit weepy, that's all."

"And I forgot." He hugged her close and kissed her bruised cheek gently. "I'm sorry, my love."

"Don't be. I only reminded you to explain why I walked out on James. I'm sorry to have upset your arrangements. I should have finished out my time as you promised I would. Mind you," she added thoughtfully, "I don't think he bothered too much, so you don't have to worry. I wouldn't have worked for him after today anyway. Miss Norton's due back next week and he'd far rather have her, she's much more efficient than I am." She smiled ruefully when he looked down at her. "Also Eve will be much happier when he's under Miss Norton's eye again."

"Eve," George stated firmly, "is a menace."

Menace or not, Eve Mellors was conspicuous by her absence the following week, and Kim wondered if she had taken James' remarks about delegating work to heart. With George settling down to work once more, things were more or less back to normal, and Kim thanked heaven for it.

There had been nothing more said about weddings and she had pushed that to the back of her mind too, hoping George had done the same.

She had seen the Fleming children most days, although with the days shortening and the colder weather, she saw them mostly at lunch time when they seemed to lie in wait for her to come home. She had seen very little of James, although once he had been in the garden at lunch time when she spoke to the children, and she had asked how his leg was.

His progress had been so satisfactory, he informed her with thanks that Doctor Morgan had said he could return

to the office next week, provided he took things easily at first. A fact, he declared, for which Miss Norton was profoundly thankful, as she found the unfamiliar surroundings distracting.

Kim had never seen Miss Norton, but she had often pictured her as blonde and glamorous, but very reserved, devoting her entire life to her career while her male colleagues admired her physical attributes from afar, never daring to take liberties. It was a picture, Kim admitted, based freely on several such women she had encountered during her own career and of whom she had always stood slightly in awe.

"Now you don't have to bother about James any more," Kim informed George on the following Monday morning. "He's gone off to the office this morning, driven by a rather hatchet-faced lady in black."

"Miss Norton," George guessed with a grin for her description, and Kim pulled a face to see yet another of her mental pictures proved wrong. At least it was understandable now why Eve Mellors had been so anxious to see James return to Miss Norton's capable care.

For another whole week Miss Norton fetched James and brought him back at night and then, on the following Monday, Kim noticed he was home again. Unable to contain her curiosity when she saw him in the garden at lunchtime, Kim went out, ostensibly to speak to the children, and she felt her cheeks go warmly pink when his expression told her that he had guessed her real reason.

"I've had the plaster off this morning," he told her, in response to her studiously casual enquiry. "I feel about two stones lighter now."

"I'm glad."

His eyes crinkled at their corners, betraying the inevitable amusement. "Miss Norton'll be glad not to have to drive

me to and from," he told her. "I'll be able to drive myself soon."

"I noticed it wasn't Miss Mellors who drove you," Kim said, unable to resist the jibe, and he looked puzzled.

"Eve?"

Kim tugged at some dead leaves and scattered them on the garden, anything rather than look at him. "I seem to remember Miss Mellors offered to drive you to and from the office," she said, and he grinned.

"Oh yes, so she did. Well, I'd still decline the offer. I feel safer with Norton's driving than Eve's."

Kim looked across to where Lee played with his sister by the house and was reminded of a promise she had made, rather rashly, the day she had refused to work for him any longer. "I really must replace Lee's boat," she said. "I meant to have done it before now, but — I don't know, somehow I just forgot it."

"It's not necessary," he told her firmly, "I'd have been annoyed if you had got him one. For one thing it was his own fault that he lost it, and for another you did quite enough with rescuing him, without bothering about his wretched toy as well."

"You — you *didn't* spank him, did you?" Her eyes were wide and appealing as a child's and she had no idea what had prompted her to ask him that, but it did seem important that he should give the right answer.

For a moment he looked at her steadily over the top of the wooden fence and the dying hydrangeas that bordered her aunt's garden. "Would it worry you very much if I did?" he asked quietly, and she blinked uncertainly, a small line drawing her brows together.

"I — I hope you didn't," she said at last, and he smiled.

"Then I didn't." She was still uncertain if he told the truth or was merely trying to say the right thing.

"James —"

His gaze was steadily disconcerting as he studied her across the barrier between them. "Kim?"

She had no real knowledge of what she would have said, but whatever it was, was destined to remain unsaid, for at that moment Aunt Bess came into sight through the shrubbery, her eyes looking vaguely unfriendly when she saw James, as they invariably did lately. Aunt Bess, Kim thought wryly, saw James as a threat to her plans for Kim and George and she wondered briefly what her aunt would do if she did not see her plans materialise.

"Kim dear," her aunt said, "isn't it time you were starting back?"

Kim glanced at her watch and confirmed the time with a droll face. "It is," she admitted, "and we're rather busy at the moment."

"George is in full spate again, I suppose." He smiled at Aunt Bess, who automatically responded — James had that kind of a smile when he put his mind to it. In his own way, Kim mused, he was as dangerously attractive as George and perhaps rather less conscious of it. "I'm sorry I kept her chattering, Mrs. Keeler," he told her aunt. "I shall have George after me if I make her too late."

"Indeed you will," Aunt Bess agreed, looking rather smugly pleased as she deliberately misunderstood him. "Mr. Daley hates to have her out of his sight for too long."

The implication in the remark, and James' expression when he recognised it for what it was, brought the colour to Kim's cheeks and she turned away hastily. "George doesn't bother how late I am, Aunt Bess," she said shortly, "and you know it." She chanced a hasty backward glance at the dark face, with the light eyes still watching her and with a hint of devilment in their depths that did things to her pulse. "I'll see you again. I expect, James," she told

him casually, mostly in defiance of her aunt's opinion, "and I hope your leg goes on improving."

"I hope so." The grey eyes glittered wickedly as he recognised her tactics, and she went hastily along the shrubby path to the house without pausing.

During the next couple of weeks Aunt Bess grew increasingly curious about Kim's relationship with George, and Kim had done nothing to enlighten her. For some time now nothing had been said at all about it, and Kim rather hoped the whole thing had been forgotten, except by Aunt Bess, of course, and she persistently made allusions to a wedding not too far in the future, though she had no encouragement from Kim.

"I've decided," Kim told Fay, one morning while George was busy with some tricky problem in his newest plot, "to tell George the truth."

Fay looked momentarily blank. "Truth?" she echoed. "Oh, I see. Yes, of course." She eyed Kim curiously. "You're not suddenly having qualms of conscience about George, are you?"

"No, it's not that." Kim frowned. "It's — well, it's Aunt Bess. She keeps asking about it and I'm getting a bit tired of having the silly thing hanging over my head."

"Aunt Bess?" Fay, looked surprised. "Haven't you told *her* the truth?"

"I have," Kim declared, "but with Aunt Bess it's a case of believing what she wants to believe, and she's determined to see me married to George."

"Oh, I see." Fay's blue eyes glinted understanding and amusement. "Auntie's been match-making, has she?"

"Wasn't it inevitable?" Kim asked resignedly. "George is good-looking, romantic and single and just the sort that aunties imagine as perfect husbands for their nieces. On

top of which, of course, he's wealthy *and* famous," she added, "he's perfect in every way as far as Aunt Bess is concerned."

"But not as far as you're concerned?" Fay ventured, and Kim looked down hastily at her fingers twined together in her lap.

"I didn't say that," she objected mildly. "I *like* George, in fact I'm very fond of him, it would be quite easy to fall in love with him even, but —"

"But?" Fay's gaze was relentless.

"Oh, Fay, I don't know ! I'm going to tell George we were only pulling his leg, although I'm pretty sure he knows we were, and then — well, we'll see what happens."

Rather surprisingly Kim found it much harder than she had imagined to mention the subject when she next was alone with George, and she was aware that he sensed her uncertainty before she even spoke.

"Is something wrong, my sweet?" he asked, and Kim shook her head warily.

"Not wrong exactly," Kim demurred. "I just wanted to talk to you about — about us."

"Us?" He was being deliberately obtuse, she felt sure.

"Oh, don't make it any more difficult, George, please."

He came and stood behind her in the window, one arm circling her neck and pulling her head back so that he could kiss her right ear. "I know what you mean, my sweet, but are you sure *you* do?"

"Oh, George, please be serious," she begged.

"But I am," he assured her solemnly, although she would have felt more convinced of his sobriety if she could have seen his face. "You want to talk about our wedding — O.K., we'll talk about it. I don't mind. Talking's all we've done about it so far, isn't it?"

She turned and faced him, her eyes questioning and dark

as the sea just visible through the window behind her. "George — do you want to marry me?" He did not immediately answer and she hurried on, fearing she might have been too blunt with her question and left no room for discreet denial. "I mean, we know it all started because you wanted to annoy Eve. You told her you were going to marry me and — well, it just went on from there, didn't it?"

There was only a glimmer of the usual laughter in his eyes as he studied her for a moment, his hands resting lightly on her arms. "And you and 'Fay thought you'd pay me back by carrying the joke over," he told her. "I know, my sweet, and I've let you stew in your own juice from then on."

"So you *did* know ! " She eyed him reproachfully.

He grinned and dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose. "Certainly I knew," he admitted. "I even got James to co-operate by telling you he was to be my best man, even that didn't drive you into the open."

"James *would* co-operate," she retorted, unsure how relieved she was. It was certainly a relief to know he had seen through their deception, but she was uncertain what he would do now. She shook her head slowly. "But you don't really want to marry me, do you?"

He was silent for a minute again, then he smiled slowly. "How can I answer that without sounding boorish and ungracious?" he asked.

"Please, George, just — just be honest, that's all I ask."

The dark, grey-blue eyes were as solemn as she had ever seen them and he kissed her again, gently and full on her mouth. "Darling, if ever I wanted to marry anyone it would be you. You're sweet and adorable, but you're also a real little cracker at times and you're lovely to look at. In short you're the most gorgeous little bargain bundle any man could ask for in a wife, but —" He sighed, one of his deep,

soul-searching sighs. "There's only one snag, darling. I'm not the marrying kind, honestly."

She *was* relieved, she was sure of it now, and she looked up at him with great shiny eyes that held laughter and affection and something else she could not have named even had she been aware of its presence. "George, I adore you!" She tipped on to her toes and kissed him warmly beside his mouth, her laughter slightly trembly, and alive with some emotion she could not properly define. "You've taken a weight off my mind."

"If you'd come out into the open before, you little vixen," he told her, "you could have heard the truth before, but it was *your* game, so it was up to you to end it."

If Kim was relieved to have the affair 'with George put into its proper perspective, Aunt Bess was less pleased, and said so that evening when Kim told her. "You could have made a very good marriage there, my dear," she told Kim. "Mr. Daley only needed your encouragement and he *would* have married you. He probably thought your asking him meant that you had changed your mind about him and he decided to do the right thing and let you go."

"Oh, Aunt Bess, don't dramatise," Kim laughed. "George is right, he *isn't* the marrying kind. He couldn't stay with just one woman for the rest of his life and he doesn't like or understand children at all, he'd be hopeless. No, darling, it wouldn't have worked, especially not with me."

"He's very fond of you," Aunt Bess insisted, reluctant to give in too easily.

"And I'm very fond of him," Kim told her, "but I don't love him, Aunt Bess, and that's what matters."

"Now, Bess dear," John Keeler reminded his wife gently, "I seem to remember there was an eminently suitable young man who wanted to marry *you* at one time, but you chose

to follow your heart and not your head and I thanked God for it, but let Kim do the same, my dear, it's only fair."

Following her heart, Kim mused, would probably prove not so easy, since she had no idea where it could lead her, but her uncle's advice was sound. She had always intended to follow her heart and not her head when it came to marriage and so far she had done just that, though how much longer she could go was in the lap of the gods.

CHAPTER X

WITH a week of December already gone and only about three weeks to Christmas, the children appeared rather less often in the garden, although Kim still saw them occasionally if she took a stroll at lunch-times. The stroll was, she admitted, most often so that she should see them if they were out, for she had grown very attached to the two little ones who were still not at school.

It was on the Saturday morning following the dénouement with George that she was hailed by Lee as she came into sight round the shrubbery. The wind was bitterly cold and the small, enquiring face was rosy red as it appeared over the top of the fence between the two gardens, obviously bursting with some excitement or other.

"Kim, Kim!" He was determined and anxious to have her attention and she waved an acknowledging hand as she walked over to him. "We're goin'," he informed her urgently, even before she could say hello.

"Going?" The idea startled her for a moment, although she knew quite well that their uncle's guardianship was only temporary, but it was uncertain, from Lee's explanation, whether just the children were leaving or James as well.

Lee nodded, his blue eyes wide and eager. "My daddy's comin' an' my mummy, an' we're goin' home."

His pleasure was such that Kim felt a lump in her throat. She would miss the children even more than she had realised, but it was good that they were to be a complete family again, and obviously Lee thought so too. She was already nostalgic when she thought of the changes she had seen in them even in the few months she had been with her aunt

and uncle. Lee had even relinquished his determined efforts to run away to sea lately, although she thought the increasingly cold weather had something to do with that.

"Are you goin' too?" Lee's query broke into her reverie and she hastily summoned a smile.

"No, I'm staying here, Lee, but I shall miss you and Terry, of course, and Ronnie too."

His nod took her emotion for granted and he eyed her steadily over the fence, looking for the moment rather dauntingly like a miniature version of his uncle. "You can stay with James," he informed her, and Kim shook her head, aware of the betraying colour in her cheeks and his curiosity at the sight of it.

"I expect your — James will miss you too," she told him, deciding to ignore his last suggestion. "He'll be all alone without you and Terry, won't he?"

He shook his head at that. "He's goin' to get mar — mar — mawwied," he managed at last, "so he won't be on his own."

Kim nodded understanding, wondering at the sudden coldness of the wind and the tightness of her hands as they clenched hard inside her gloves. It was reasonable, of course, for James to take up where the arrival of the children had obliged him to leave off. Once he was free of his responsibilities it was inevitable he would go back to his old ways and go on seeing Eve Mellors. Whether it would be practicable for him to marry her was, she thought, in some doubt.

Despite her own remarks about his fitness to have charge of children, she had to face the fact that he *was* fond of them and they of him. She might have judged him harsh in his treatment of Lee, but she had been forced to admit that, as Fay had implied, his bark was much worse than his bite, while Eve, on the other hand, definitely disliked children and made no secret of it.

"He'll miss you, though, won't he?" she insisted, trying vainly to visualise Eve Mellors as living next door, and as James' wife, neither of which prospects appealed to her in the least.

Lee nodded. "I 'spect he will," he agreed, and climbed down off the fence when someone appeared at the back door.

Kim did not stay to see who it was, but turned away hurriedly so as not to see James if it should happen to be him. She was not prepared yet, she thought, to offer congratulations.

Aunt Bess was a prolific letter writer and Tuesday night was her habitual night for clearing her correspondence, so that by nine o'clock she had four letters ready to post and smiled gratefully when Kim offered to take them for her.

"I feel like a walk," Kim assured her in answer to her thanks, "and it's a lovely night, despite the cold."

It was indeed a lovely night and Kim breathed the clear air appreciatively as she stepped outside the front door with her letters. She thought she heard the gate next door open and close as she started along towards the post box, and turned wondering if Mrs. Pannet was on an errand like her own.

It was not Mrs. Pannet's short, dumpy figure that followed her, however, but the tall, rangy outline of James, his stride even longer than usual as he strove to catch up with her. "Post?" he asked, and held up one of his own.

"Yes," Kim smiled uncertainly. "I—I can take yours for you if you like."

He grinned amiably. "I was going to offer to take yours for you."

"I feel like a walk, actually," Kim told him, and he smiled down at her invitingly.

"So do I, so suppose we both just keep on walking past the post box?" Uncertain of her own reaction, Kim nodded silently. "If you have no rooted objection, of course," he added, and she detected a hint of challenge.

"Of course not."

It was a sharp frosty night, but filled with stars that glittered like Christmas tree lights over the dark sea and Kim felt some strange, heart-stirring atmosphere that filled her head with chaotic thoughts, whirling round and round crazily uncontrollable.

"It's a lovely night," James declared, and Kim nodded, still feeling slightly unreal in the still, starry coldness.

"Beautiful," she agreed.

She had the warm collar of her coat pulled up round her face and above it her fair hair shone like gold under the street lights. "Too beautiful to leave outside and shut the door," he suggested, and she nodded. He looked up at the display of stars, then down at her face, softly pretty in the lamp light. "Much too beautiful," he repeated softly.

It was only as they climbed the path to the cliff top that she realised how far they had come, and she only now realised that James' arm encircled her shoulders, an added warmth in the chill air. They had uttered barely a word between them as they walked.

At the top of the cliff, Kim looked down at the sea, dark and heaving like some breathless giant as it strove to climb the rock face and succeeded only in shattering itself to pieces in a shower of white foam. Suddenly she realised the sheer madness of being up there in the dark and smiled. It was something she would never have done on her own, especially on a cold December night, for she was not nearly as surefooted as James was on that narrow path, and she could not imagine what had possessed her to accompany him so willingly.

Sensing her smile, he looked down at her. "Tell me," he prompted, and she did not need to question his meaning. "Why the enigmatic smile?"

Kim shrugged as best she could for the encircling arm. "No reason," she denied, "except that I — I suddenly thought how *crazy it was*, to *come* up here in the dark."

"Not crazy at all," he denied, inevitably.

"Maybe not for you," Kim retorted automatically, "but I'm not given to doing mad things on impulse."

"Oh yes, you are," he argued. "You're the impulsive type."

"You can't say that," she denied hastily, "you don't know me well enough."

He laughed, prepared to argue again. "I think I do," he said quietly. "After four months of living next door to you *and* having you work for me for a while, I think I know you, Kim."

"Is it only four months?" It seemed suddenly as if she had spent a lifetime in Woodsea, living next door to James and the children, it all seemed so familiar.

"Four quite eventful months," he agreed.

They were silent again for a while, walking slowly over the rather cold dampness of the turf. There was little wind, despite the cold, and it made almost no sound at all. James stopped suddenly and Kim, caught in his arm, was obliged to do the same. "It's quiet," he said softly.

Kim looked up at the dark, shadowed face, finding it suddenly and reassuringly familiar. "It's rather dangerous too, isn't it?" she asked, trying to avoid the quiet intimacy that seemed to be enveloping them gradually. She sensed his puzzlement and laughed softly. "I was thinking about your villainous ancestor, Abel Fleming." The wind, the stars and the quiet stirred some deep emotion in her that set her pulses hammering wildly at her temple and her

blood racing through her body like a glow of fire, and she laughed again, a little wildly. "You might take it into your head to throw me over the cliff."

The arm round her shoulders tightened and his voice deepened, setting her heart drumming wildly against her ribs. "You've got your facts wrong," he told her. "That was Squire Murgles, not old Abel, and he flung his *mistress* into the sea. You're not making improper suggestions, are you, Miss Anders?" A soft laugh forestalled her reply, tickling her ear and trickling along her spine so that she found it increasingly difficult to think sensibly. "I know about you and George," he added, before she could say anything and, though it sounded irrelevant, she knew it was not. It was important suddenly that George should have no claim on her and she half turned her head, remembering Eve Mellors.

The blonde girl would not be so easy to dismiss as George, she thought. "I — I hear I have to congratulate you," she told him. "Lee tells me *you're* getting married."

For a moment she wondered if she had misread his mood and been too outspoken, but there was no relaxation in the arm that held her. "Lee," he said quietly at last, "talks too much, and he's premature too."

"Oh, I see, I'm sorry." Nothing, it seemed, could still the furious beating of her heart, nor the glowing warmth of the blood racing through her — not even the thought of Eve Mellors.

He laughed softly again, close to her ear and she stirred, suddenly and suspiciously lighthearted. This was not the kind of outcome she had anticipated when she started out to post Aunt Bess's letters and she wondered dizzily if things were going rather too fast for her. She should perhaps bring them both firmly down to earth again, and she drew a deep breath to do just that — then she felt his lips

brush gently against her neck.

"Do you still think I'm-a sadistic monster?" he asked.

"No — no, I don't think so." It was difficult to speak without her voice trembling betrayingly and the words that had been meant to restore sanity, faded without being said.

"Do you still insist that you wouldn't let me near any child of yours?" he insisted.

She felt the blood warm her cheeks and knew he must feel it too, for his face was close to hers, his lips gently caressing her face and neck. "James!" It was now or never, if she was to behave sensibly.

"Hmm?" He turned her to face him, and she was reminded of the time they had stood on the intoxicating heights of Smugglers' Walk.

"Please, James, you —"

"*You* talk too 'much as well," he informed her, and his laugh, soft and deep, ended when his mouth found hers, and he held her for what seemed like a lifetime. "You *will* marry me, won't you?" he asked when she was too breathless to do anything else but nod silently. "I promise not to beat our children, and I'd hate to see Lee appear untruthful about my getting married."

"But —" Kim sought for words. "Eve," she managed at last.

"Eve," he declared blandly, "doesn't like children."

Even if it had not been true, it was no time to argue, Kim realised; there were far too many other things to distract her and quite honestly Eve Mellors seemed to matter very little at the moment.