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Flamingo Presents

MARGARET ROME

adam's rib



ADAM'S RIB

Margaret Rome

"Like it or not, you will become my wife," Adam promised grimly. "Either willingly or unwillingly; the choice is yours. But if you decide to fight me, don't forget I won't be the first Fox to capture a Maxwell woman by force!"

Not this Maxwell woman, Tammy thought. But her curiosity was aroused. Marriage to such a man could mean a life of temperamental strife. Her will against his. Yet priceless spoils would be bestowed upon the victor.

Doubts nagged her: Did she care? Did she have the daredevil nerve of her plundering reiver ancestors?

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN he strode through the doorway a blast of pure mountain air seemed to slice a pathway through the smog-filled room.

Tammy became immediately oblivious to the sounds around her—the tinkling of wine glasses, the refined, ultra-sophisticated chatter, a deep satisfied chuckle as her father sliced the end off yet another rich, plump cigar. With eyes transfixed she watched the dark stranger advance into the room, his look seeking, his proud head swivelling from one group of people to another, keenly alert.

The effervescent chatter hushed as gradually individuals became aware of and were reluctantly drawn to study the tall alien whose natural pride of manner seemed to project the arrogant question: "Who was the best man here before I came in?"

Tammy had no need to glance around. Of the many men present a handful could have topped his six feet by a couple of inches, others had shoulders equally wide though not so muscular, some were more handsome, but there was not one whose masculinity was so devastatingly projected. This man was of the good red earth, she decided. Though his dinner jacket sat easily upon his shoulders and his relaxed manner proclaimed him no stranger to society, there was that about him which gave rise to the suspicion that he had little time for social gatherings and might indeed be resenting such a function making inroads into his time.

"I like him, I *like* him!" one of her girl friends screamed beneath her breath. "Please introduce me, Tammy!"

"Not on your life!" was Tammy's silent reaction. "This one is all mine!"

Smiling vaguely and pretending not to have heard, she murmured, "Will you please excuse me while I attend to this late arrival?" Anxious, for once, to carry out her duties as hostess in a manner her father would have approved, she made a beeline for the guest, standing alone in the middle of the room looking not one whit disturbed by his isolation.

Conscious that her dress of blue, gossamer-light wool complemented her figure perfectly, she drifted towards him and in the slightly husky voice many admirers had affirmed sounded divine, she questioned, "Can I get you a drink, Mr... ? I'm sorry, I don't know your name. Mine is Tammy Maxwell and you, I presume, must be a friend of my father's?"

When his head jerked in her direction she preened a little, waiting for the quick appreciation that generally followed upon her introduction to a presentable male. Then the instant his blue eyes were levelled upon her she felt the sensation of ground falling from beneath her feet; a turmoil of emotion erupted, spinning her head with the dizzying speed of a blast-off rocket.

She tried to pull herself together, thinking how her friends would laugh if ever she should try to describe the sensational experience. A second earlier she would have laughed with them, as they had laughed together at late-night movies depicting the saccharine sweetness of love Twenties style, an era to which most of their parents belonged and which was therefore denigrated, its moral code of conduct scorned as archaic.

A flash of insight supplied the answer to a problem that had been bothering her for months. Not even to herself had she been able to explain her reluctance to follow the example of the rest of her set. To them, sleeping around was an essential part of modern living, but she had never yet managed to match word with deed. As a liberated young woman she had vociferously maintained her belief in woman's

right to freedom in all things, yet something—perhaps, as one rejected male had been heard to remark, the puritanical streak inherited from her bourgeois ancestors—had prevented her from going the whole way. As the only child of a very wealthy father she had been able to shrug off the insult, but now, under surveilling eyes of sharp, all- seeing blue, she no longer felt embarrassed by her abstinence—just fiercely glad.

His response, when it came, was like a douche of cold water. A runt from a prize litter might have culled from him as much interest as did the girl with hair fashionably styled into a smooth brown cap and fringed over a broad young forehead, arresting brown eyes, impudently tilted nose, and a-mouth most men felt impelled to kiss.

Not this man, however.

"How do you do, Miss Maxwell," he clipped. "My name is Adam Fox. If your father is Jock Maxwell then it was he I spoke to on the telephone earlier this evening when he asked me to present myself here at eight- thirty." He slicked back his cuff to examine his watch. "If you would be kind enough to point him out to me, I haven't a great deal of time ..

"Why don't you stay and have dinner with us?" She directed a conspiratorial grin. "I should, if you want to discuss business, because Daddy's always more amenable after a good meal."

Her smile was annihilated by a gimlet stare. "I have not come here to woo your father, Miss Maxwell, his wish is to buy and mine is to sell, a straightforward procedure that should take up no more than ten minutes of his time. Now, please, will you take me to him?"

The request had an icy edge that almost, but not quite, deflated her bubbling spirits. She decided to try again, assured by past experience

that no man ever remained invulnerable to her deliberately exerted charm.

"Don't let this crowd put you off accepting my invitation, Mr Fox," she sounded almost pleading. "They're here just for cocktails and will be leaving shortly. There'll be only Daddy and myself for dinner, so if you do decide to join us we could spend the evening getting to know one another after your business has been concluded."

Once more the wrist was lifted and the cuff clicked back. Pointedly he stared at his watch. "Miss Maxwell, I have a train to catch in less than an hour ..."

"Damn him!" she muttered under her breath as she led him towards the corner where Jock Maxwell was inflicting his views on the difficulties of business life to a handful of long-suffering contemporaries. His listeners' faces brightened, however, when Tammy approached with a glowering young man in tow.

"Lovely party, my dear!" one old gentleman offered. "And may I say how beautiful you're looking this evening?"

Jock Maxwell's eyes narrowed. Benson was an old fool, yet he could hardly be expected to recognize the colour in his daughter's cheeks as flags of temper and the glint which, to his experienced eye, denoted the presence of vexed tears. Curiously he eyed the young man accompanying her. Not one of the men in his daughter's tempestuous young life was capable, in his opinion, of penetrating her ultra-modern shell to the extent of making her cry—more was the pity! His eyes kindled with approval as Tammy presented him.

"Daddy, this gentleman says he has an appointment with you."

"Then you must be Adam Fox," Jock beamed. "Sorry to have to ask you to talk business outside of office hours, but you did say you were

pushed for time, so I had no alternative. Come to my study, young man, we can talk there without the risk of disturbance."

Adam Fox acknowledged the invitation with a brief nod and followed Jock out of the room, leaving Tammy feeling abandoned in an oasis thronged with plastic people—people as shallow, boring and characterless as their shrill, affected voices. For the next ten minutes she circulated, keeping a wary eye on the door of her father's study, then to her relief the first of the guests ' began making their goodbyes and soon only a handful remained. She eyed the debris of half-empty glasses, full ashtrays, scatterings of assorted nuts and other varied titbits, then sighed. The cocktail party had been a great success, so why did she feel so unsettled—so jaded and dissatisfied?

Steve Harris was the last to leave. As she proffered her cheek for his farewell peck her absent look quickened his interest.

"Lovely do, my pet," he murmured, "with the usual quota of interesting people." He patted his breast pocket. "I have enough notes here to feed my column for the next few days. By the way," his tone was almost too casual, "who was the mean, moody type with the look of a stag at bay? One of your latest conquests? Don't hold out on me, will you, sweetie—we have an understanding, remember?"

Tammy was alerted to warning signals. Steve was indefatigable in his quest for choice titbits with which to enhance the gossip column he penned in acid for a national daily. His comments on the London social scene were avidly devoured each morning by all members of her set and in the past she herself had found amusement in supplying him with tip-offs that had sent him nosing like a greyhound on the track of the latest scandal. In this instance, however, she found his probing offensive.

"The stag at bay, as you call him, is no more than a business acquaintance of my father's. Don't push your luck, Steve," she warned

coldly, "or you might find your well of information suddenly running dry."

He was astute enough to realize that she was warning him off and cloaked his intense curiosity with a light laugh.

"You-can't blame me for trying, sweetie!" he shrugged, "not when you're the only one of your crowd who hasn't, at some time or another, featured in one of my articles. Up to date, you've never put a foot wrong, have you?" he considered her thoughtfully. "Amazing, really, considering you're involved up to your pretty neck in the same permissive environment. You have at your disposal a villa in France, a seagoing yacht, this pad here in London, unlimited leisure time and money enough to indulge every whim—the temptation to err must at times be enormous." He chuckled her under the chin. "Either you're a model of virtue or you've been very, very discreet!"

She almost pushed him through the door, anxious to be rid of him in case the study door should open to allow the most interesting man on her horizon to escape.

"You talk as much nonsense as you write, Steve! 'Bye, see you some time ..."

She need not have panicked. The best part of an hour passed as, keyed to a high pitch, she cleared the room of debris, opened the windows to disperse the smoky fug, then settled in an armchair pretending to read a magazine while she strove for a look of composure. Her small fund of patience was almost depleted by the time the study door opened and Adam Fox and her father re-entered the room.

"Tammy, would you see that the bed is made up in the spare room? Adam hadn't planned on staying the night, but as our business discussion took up more time than expected he's missed his train, so I've insisted he stay the night with us."

Tammy stared at her father, loving anew the stocky forthright character who could always be relied upon as an ally.

"Why, yes, of course," she stammered, "I'll see to it right away."

Adam Fox had the look of a man not quite sure of his bearings. Steely eyes looked almost dazed, yet his voice was as authoritative as ever. "I've assured your father that there's no need to put you to such trouble, I can quite easily put up at a hotel."

"Nonsense, my boy," Jock twinkled. "Being a northerner myself I can appreciate your reluctance to feel beholden to anyone, so as a sop to your independence I shall ask a favour in return so that honour may be satisfied."

"Please do." Adam's swift reply confirmed Jock's suspicion that he was dealing with a man of rebellious nature, one loath to accept favours. "You've been most generous, businesswise especially, and if there's any way I can show my gratitude..."

"There is, my boy, there is!" Jock affirmed, beaming genially. "Later this evening I have to go out, which means that my little girl here will be left on her own for most of the evening. Perhaps you would keep her company, allow her to show you the sights?"

For a split second Adam Fox's dismay was obvious, then, making a massive effort, he uttered one stiff word of agreement. "Certainly."

Tammy found his lack of enthusiasm galling. Her temper almost erupted, but from somewhere she discovered a restraint grown rusty from lack of use. It sufficed, however, to get her through the ordeal of being almost ignored by Adam Fox whose conversation all during dinner was directed exclusively towards her father. Her expression of mingled chagrin and frustration amused Jock greatly and roguishly he prolonged her torment by encouraging Adam's absorption with

matters of business. Finally, after one or two attempts to change the subject, she was forced to join in.

"Are you in the same line of business as my father, Mr Fox?"

He turned upon her a slightly surprised look, as if, Tammy fumed, he expected her to confine herself to carrying out her duties as hostess, then fade quietly into the background.

"Not really," he replied, "or only in the very loosest sense. Your father owns woollen mills and I represent a consortium of Border sheep farmers eager to sell its wool. We rear and shear to provide raw material for the cloth he eventually sells."

"How interesting." Her tone sounded false even to her own ears. "The moment I saw you I thought you had the look of an outdoor enthusiast."

"I do spend as much time as possible on the fells," he concurred.

"Fells...?" she queried.

"The Cumbrian fells," his tone questioned the existence of any other, "on the Anglo-Scottish border."

Tammy choked a little with excitement; at last she had found some common ground! "Did you hear that, Daddy? Our ancestors might easily have been neighbours!" Eagerly she informed Adam, "My father's family originated from Annandale, on the southern Scottish border!"

Even Jock noticed Adam's reaction to this piece of news and wondered at the tightening of his lips and at knuckles outstanding on suddenly clenched fists. Brilliant eyes darkened momentarily, rendering the same effect as cloud passing across the sun, but when

the cloud dispersed Adam's glance was rapier bright, roving Jock's craggy features, seeming to evaluate slowly each blunt characteristic.

"It's possible that in the past we might, indeed, have been neighbours," he affirmed grimly. "In fact, now that you've drawn my attention to it, I see a clear resemblance to a portrait that hangs in one of my neighbours' houses. Its sitter was one Black Jock of Annandale."

"By jove, I'd like to take a look at that!" Jock leant forward, interested. "My family moved to the Midlands two generations ago and it was then that the first of our weaving sheds was opened. Since then we've been too engrossed building up the business to visit our Scottish relatives. I had no idea I possessed such illustrious ancestors—I presume they *were* illustrious?" he laughed.

Something about Adam's expressionless stare caused his laughter to fade.

"In their day they were certainly well known," Adam agreed. "Even today, in the Borders at least, tales of their exploits are still being recalled."

Tammy shivered. His voice held brooding disquiet, obviously the information he had received had come as a shock—an unpleasant shock. The word he had used to describe her ancestors had sounded far from complimentary. He could have described them as distinguished or famous, but no, he had chosen to use the expression well-known. Well known for what ? Many thieves were well-known—scoundrels, even murderers could lay claim to the adjective!

She shook herself free of the fanciful notion that he was regretting his business dealings with her father. Jock Maxwell was magnanimous to a fault to those he approved of, and he had obviously taken a great

liking to this tall, dour stranger, which might account for the slightly dazed expression Tammy had noticed when he had entered the room. But if, as he had said, he represented a consortium, he was not free to follow his own inclinations. However badly he might wish it, he could hardly retract from whatever business deal had been arranged but would feel honour bound to place the interests of his fellow farmers before his own personal feelings.

CHAPTER TWO

THE atmosphere of strain lingered all during dinner. Even Jock, not the most perceptive of men, sensed that their guest was preoccupied with thoughts of his own and felt irritated by the fact that, typical of his self-sufficient race, Adam Fox showed no inclination towards easing the situation.

After dinner, feeling a mixture of relief and curiosity, he made haste to leave Tammy to cope. The manner of the taciturn northerner fell far short of frivolous yet, deep down, Jock felt certain, lay a treasure trove of qualities well rewarding to anyone willing to dig. But did his spoilt, capricious daughter have the staying power, the true grit, needed to crack the man's tough shell? Obviously she was intrigued, and for that very reason he had astounded the young man by offering to buy every fleece he had a mind to supply and had deliberately kept their conversation going until well after train departure time. All her life Tammy had had everything money could buy, and though Adam Fox was not for sale at least he had carried on the precedent by setting the stage for future meetings and by giving her these few hours alone with the man who had captured her interest more intensely than anyone he had ever known.

"Enjoy yourselves, children!" he cast a cross his shoulder, making towards the door. "I should be back about one."

Tammy was astounded by madly fluttering pulses as she sank down on to a settee and spread her skirts wide. "Like a Victorian maiden with the vapours!" she thought wildly. Then she took firm hold of her wits and patted the space next to her, sending him a beckoning smile. "Sit here, and tell me all about yourself, Mr Fox. No, Adam sounds much more friendly, don't you think? And you must call me Tammy ..."

A blush she had thought long extinct was resurrected when, ignoring her invitation, he chose to sit opposite, separated from her by yards of carpet.

"Well now, Adam," she strove to sound composed, "what would you like to do—take in a show, go to a nightclub, or shall we just drift around the bars sampling the delights of each?"

"London holds no delights for me, Miss Maxwell. Most of the shows I've seen advertised I would find embarrassing to watch, nightclubs bore me, and when I drink I prefer to do so in very different surroundings from those you suggest."

Tammy fought rising indignation and her impudent nose took on a higher tilt. To any other man she would have replied that he was an unsociable boor. The words were scorching her tongue, ready to be spat, then once more she was pinned in his sights and felt herself drowning in eyes of deep, fascinating blue.

"There must be something you would like to do?" she urged meekly. "Unless," her wayward spirits rose, "you would prefer that we remain here all evening?"

The speed with which he rose to his feet showed his abhorrence of that idea. "I would like some fresh air,

is there a park nearby? If not, we might walk along by the river."

"Walk . . .?" she echoed faintly. Her hand-made, delicately-soled shoes had barely made contact with a pavement, yet when he nodded she jumped to her feet and made towards her bedroom. "I must change into something warmer—give me five minutes."

She was shocked to discover that her hands were shaking as she ripped off the gossamer-fine evening dress and began searching

through her wardrobe for clothing adequate enough for tramping the streets on a cold March evening. A wardrobe ran the full length of one wall. Cocktail dresses, evening dresses, dresses of fine wool, of silk, of cotton, were there by the dozen, all designed to be worn within the rarefied atmosphere in which Tammy spent most of her time. Impatiently she brushed them all aside, then remembering the skiing holiday she had taken last year and the vast amount of clothes she had purchased for the trip, she hastened to the far end of the wardrobe and slid back the door. Heavy trouser suits, anoraks and thick-knit jumpers had all been stored away by the housekeeper under cotton covers. Conscious of the seconds being recorded by the serviceable watch strapped around a steely wrist, she grabbed the first suit to hand and rapidly squirmed into it.

She was vain enough to pause for a second in front of a mirror before dashing out of the bedroom. "Hmm, not bad," she congratulated her reflection, pleased with the way the elegantly tailored trouser suit added length to her legs and the material of pure, creamy wool flattered her cap of nut-brown hair. "He's bound to notice me in this!" she enthused, then spun on her heel, anxious to note the effect of her efforts.

Adam Fox was waiting impatiently, his hand reaching towards the door, when she all but ran across the width of carpet to reach him. "Five minutes, as promised," she smiled, the natural, gamin smile usually reserved for her father. Wearing low-heeled shoes, she had to tilt back her head to look into his tanned, weather-hardened features. She waited, tense with anticipation, and felt dashed as a rebuffed puppy when without a flicker of interest he replied,

"Right, let's go."

After a couple of hours of trotting along hard pavements in an effort to keep up with his rangy stride Tammy began to suspect that the whole aim of the exercise was to inflict upon herself sheer physical

torture. Occasionally, Adam Fox glanced down at her agonized face and the grim contours of his lips lifted a little in the caricature of a smile. -At first suspicion she dismissed the notion as being unworthy of him, but gradually as her distress became more acute his amusement became marked, and it was then that Tammy began to burn.

Doggedly she matched his pace, her mind racing at speed. Never in her life had she been the subject of such cavalier treatment! Especially not by one of the opposite sex. Obviously he despised her and all she stood for, and this was his mean, sneaky way of doling out contempt. Too prudish to take in a show! Too high and mighty to visit a nightclub! Too choosy of his companions to frequent a bar! The highly moral, stand-offish, anti-social Adam Fox needed to be taken down a peg or two—and given sufficient provocation she was just the girl to do it!

Provocation came unexpectedly swiftly.

He stopped in his tracks and turned to face her. "Well, Miss Socialite," he startled her, "for once in your life you've expended some physical energy and clearly you haven't enjoyed the experience. Shall I call a taxi to take you back to the flat? At least by doing so you'll be contributing in some small measure to society by helping the cabbie to earn his keep."

The cold torrent of words took her breath away, but not for long. Even as she struggled to articulate her mind was ticking over with the speed and precision attributed to her father—the man many people declared possessed the sharpest business brain in Britain.

They had been crossing a bridge when he had halted and to hide her disconcertion she leant against the parapet and peered down at the dark swirl of water.

"I'm sorry you think so little of me, are you in the habit of jumping to swift conclusions?"

"I would have to be both blind and deaf not to recognize the kind of person you are—a social butterfly, a parasite amongst humanity feeding upon all that's rich and giving nothing in return. Oh, I grant that you're decorative, even beautiful, but you're also vain, selfish, and a complete dead loss as a human being."

"How very perceptive of you!" she choked, angry with herself for having to blink away tears. Why should it matter what this arrogant backwoodsman thought of her? She was a much sought after darling of society, always in demand, and with the pick of a dozen men more handsome, more attentive, and far more complimentary. So why did she flinch against the flick of his scorn?

"Before we return to the flat there's something I would like you to see, I'm sure you'll find it of interest and it's not far away. Humour me in this, if not for my sake then for the sake of my father."

The mention of her father touched a chord. The deal that had taken place must have been very beneficial indeed to the consortium when it engendered such a feeling of indebtedness from its representative.

"Very well," he shrugged, "lead the way."

Suppressing a surge of triumph and not a little trepidation, Tammy directed him towards a flight of steps leading down to the river whose banks were lined with a conglomeration of small sailing craft. Curiously he followed and when she stopped, indicating a small cabin cruiser, his eyebrows elevated. Wordlessly he followed her aboard, then down a flight of steps to the galley where, with a swell of pride, she waved a hand around the tiny interior and asked, "Would you make us a cup of tea while I go and beg a jug of milk?"

Without waiting for his reply she climbed back on deck and left him searching curiously around the confined space containing a table flanked by two upholstered benches that converted into bunks and a small, well appointed galley with cupboards stocked with provisions.

A quarter of an hour later she returned carrying a bottle half full of milk. Adam Fox had made a pot of tea and set two mugs upon the table.

"I'm surprised you found such a journey necessary," he nodded at the milk bottle, "there's plenty of tinned milk in the store cupboard."

Tammy blushed a guilty red and hastened to explain. "I prefer fresh whenever possible, tinned milk is apt to spoil the flavour of the tea."

To her relief he accepted the explanation. "I suppose this boat is yet another plaything bought by an indulgent father?"

"It's no plaything!" she snapped. "I love it, I spend hours on the river."

"Alone?"

"Mostly."

"You surprise me, I didn't think you a solitary person."

"But you know very little about me, Mr Fox," she reminded him gently. "Your conclusions are based on preconceived ideas and not on personal knowledge."

He ignored the dig. "All boats should be hauled out if not used during the winter, and protected as much as possible from the weather."

"I'm aware of that," she kept a straight face, "but it's in use all the year round, not just in summer. Believe it or not, I put in an awful lot of work on her, a competent shipwright looks her over once in a while,

but I caulk any leaking seams and do all the painting myself. First of all I clean her well and give her a good rub down with coarse sandpaper, then when she's dry I give Tier a coat of primer and fill up any cracks with putty before applying the first coat of paint. Also," she puffed with pride, "I scrub her regularly to keep her clean."

His look of disbelief was so galling she jumped to her feet, leaving her half-empty cup on the table, and ran up on deck. Angrily she switched on the engine and when the motor throbbed felt exhilaration coursing through her veins. Gently she eased away from the mooring and chugged past the crowded anchorage, mindful of the wash that could cause an anchored yacht's meal to land on the cabin floor, then, making sure the channel was clear, she headed the boat flat out towards the open sea.

As she had confidently expected, he joined her on deck in a matter of seconds. "What the blazes do you think you're doing?" he shouted above the noise of the engine. "The sea is no place for novices!" Quickly he -swung his head from port to starboard, checking navigation lights, and at the same time betraying a knowledge of the laws of the sea that put Tammy on her mettle.

"Don't be squeamish, Mr Fox," she yelled back, "I've studied the nautical almanac, the tide tables, and the buoyage system, so you can feel quite safe with me!"

It was wild and dangerous fun to speed out into the darkness feeling the powerful little boat thrusting under her guiding hands. Not even Adam Fox's fuming presence and the terse imprecations that floated past her in the wind could eliminate her sense of power, her absolute domination over this aggravating man!

She had judged to a nicety the moment when the engine would give its first warning splutter, and had to strive hard to keep amusement

out of her voice when in answer to his sharp "What's wrong?" she replied,

"I don't know, I haven't studied the mechanics of sailing..." "Good God!" His imprecation was mild compared with the angry exasperation of his tone. At that moment the engine cut completely, leaving a silence that was deafening.

"What do you think it might be?" she questioned meekly, edging away from his superior bulk."

"Ignition, compression, or the fuel supply," he replied tersely. "Thank heaven we're outside the main shipping lanes! Even so, to be on the safe side you keep a sharp look out while I test the ignition."

Tammy's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter as she watched him testing the plugs. When he was satisfied that they were all in order he turned his attention to the compression, then finally, as a last resort, he unscrewed the petrol pipe. She tensed, awaiting his furious outburst, but when he turned to face her his tone was quietly incredulous.

"The tanks are empty—you've run out of fuel!"

"Oh, how silly of me!" Her nervous quaver was genuine. "Never mind, we'll just have to spend the night aboard and get a tow in the morning."

A pregnant silence stretched into infinity. Uneasily she shifted from one foot to the other wondering what thoughts were teeming behind the furrowed brow, what scathing remarks were about to fall from his tight lips. It said much for his control that he confined his answer to one terse sentence. "You go below, I'll spend the night on deck."

"But it's so cold ...!" she protested.

"Go below, Miss Maxwell," he threatened through clenched teeth.

"Very well," she flounced, "but don't blame me if you're caught in a downpour!"

She spent the intervening hours stretched out on a bunk listening to his footsteps pacing the deck above, then as dawn was breaking she nerved herself to face him. But first, she decided, it might be politic to soothe the beast by preparing a substantial breakfast.

Soon the smell of bacon and eggs was wafting in the air, the aroma drawing like a magnet the tired-eyed, stubbly-chinned man who stumbled down the steps to the galley and wrapped his frozen fingers around a mug of steaming coffee. One glance into his wild blue eyes told her that this was not the time for an apology, so wordlessly she pushed before him a plateful of food and waited in silence until every morsel had been devoured.

"Ahoy there!" The call reached clearly across the water. Over the rims of their mugs their startled eyes met, then Adam Fox jumped up to rush on deck and slowly she followed him. A river patrol boat was riding alongside of them. "Are you in trouble?" a voice shouted through a megaphone.

"We need a tow!" Adam yelled back. "Can you oblige?"

"Sure thing!" was the reply. "We'll have you berthed in no time!"

An hour later, good as their word, the crew of the launch had escorted them safely back to their moorings. Gratefully, they waved their thanks to the grinning men who had accepted Adam's stilted explanation of having run out of fuel with howls of derision. For Tammy's benefit the teasing quips had been kept to a minimum, but by the time their rescuers were leaving she sensed that Adam's patience had worn very thin.

A clock was striking five as they stepped ashore.

"We'll be lucky to find a taxi at this hour of the morning," he muttered, "better prepare yourself for a long walk back to the flat."

For the first time in hours he looked straight into her solemn face. Big-eyed, she stared back, regretting now her impulsive action but too scared of reprisal to admit that the whole episode had been no more than a practical joke.

A blinding flash of light caused her to blink. For a fanciful second she attributed it to the startling effect Adam had upon her senses, then as his head jerked round she followed the direction of his furious stare.

A wildly-grinning Steve Harris waved his flash camera in the air. "Just one more for luck!" he grinned before a second blinding flash captured their startled images.

CHAPTER THREE

VERY rarely did Tammy join her father for breakfast, so his eyebrows rose when she appeared later that morning and slipped into a chair next to him. Lack of sleep had left no mark upon her vivacious features, only her eyes bore shadows, and they cleared immediately she scanned his undisturbed face. Clearly he was unaware of the night-long escapade in which she had been involved.

This fact was confirmed by his greeting. "Good morning, my pet, did you have an enjoyable evening? Sorry I arrived home . . . er . . . rather late, I was delayed."

She sent him an absent smile. Her father's one vice—if it could be so named—was a prediction for card games played way into the early hours of the morning, a harmless enough diversion yet one to which he would never readily admit.

"That's perfectly all right, Daddy, I was rather late getting in myself."

Before she could launch into an explanation he forestalled her with a knowing chuckle. "You wouldn't be my daughter if you hadn't taken full advantage of the opportunity that presented itself—or rather the opportunity I manufactured. You like that young man, don't you?" Good-humouredly he buttered a slice of toast. "For once, I agree with your choice, and for that very reason I went out of my way to offer him a gooddeal. Normally, as you know, purchasing is left entirely in the hands of my very capable buyers, but in this instance I felt justified in trading at a loss not because I felt sorry for the young man pleading so hard on behalf of his associates for a more realistic price than that being offered on the market but because I was astute enough to realize that once the deal was accomplished Adam Fox would feel obliged to fall in with whatever suggestions I might care to make. Now tell me," he bit with savour into his toast, "did my plan succeed?"

"Well . . . er . . . that's what I want to talk to you about, Daddy." Nervously Tammy toyed with a napkin, unsure, for the first time in her life, of her father's reactions. Just as she was about to begin her explanation she was once again interrupted, this time by the chiming of the doorbell. She faltered, unwilling to go on until she had her father's complete attention.

They Waited in silence Until their housekeeper admitted the caller, then looked up in surprise when Adam Fox strode into the room, alert of step, freshly shaven, and obviously impatient to be on his way.

"Adam, my boy, I thought you were still asleep!"

He grimaced. "Hardly, as a rule at this hour of the morning I'm halfway through a day's work. No, I've been down to the station to enquire about trains, and there's one leaving in a couple of hours that will suit me fine."

Jock, acutely sensitive to his daughter's moods, glanced her way, wondering at her sudden interest in the contents of her plate. It was unlike her to avoid meeting anyone's eyes. Adam too, he noted, had barely spared her a glance and seemed more anxious than was polite to be on his way. Feeling suddenly disgruntled, he rose from the table, tucking his newspaper under his arm. The ways of today's youngsters were beyond him, they seemed to take a delight in reacting contrary to expectations.

"No doubt I'll see you before you leave," he grunted, moving in the direction of the sitting-room, exasperated by the misuse of his subtle conniving. Left alone, Adam and Tammy stared at each other, Adam distant and cool, Tammy suffering a rush of shamed embarrassment.

"Does he know?" A muscle jerked in Adam's cheek.

"Know what...?" She was playing for time and he knew it.

A sudden bellow of rage from inside the sitting-room confirmed Tammy's worst dread. "He does now," she whispered, bracing herself for the inevitable showdown.

Adam's expression of surprise when Jock dashed into the room bellowing furiously, his newspaper threshing the air, was so ludicrous Tammy was almost, but, not quite, tempted to laugh.

"What the hell's the meaning of this?" Jock flourished the newspaper beneath Adam's dilated nostrils. "I want an explanation, and by God, it had better be good!"

Adam seemed poised for a sharp reply, then his eye was caught by a blown-up photograph depicting a man and a girl, dishevelled, and looking unbelievably guilty, beneath a caption that screamed, sickly coy: "What *will* Daddy say?"

Underneath, in smaller print, Steve had excelled himself in vitriolic humour. The couple of sentences Tammy glimpsed across Adam's shoulder were enough *to explain the dull tide of colour seeping under his tan*. Socialite's all-night idyll on the ocean waves; Miss Touch-me-not Maxwell falls captive to lusty northern charm! *Their excuse—would you believe—they ran out of fuel* ?

"*Damnation!*" The newspaper was crushed between Adam's mighty fists. "I'll wring that blasted reporter's neck!"

Jock breathed deeply. "Can you offer me one good reason why *I* shouldn't wring *yours!*"

Adam stared. "You surely don't believe his filthy innuendoes... ?"

"It makes little difference whether I do or I don't," Jock snapped furiously. "The question is, how many of our friends will believe them? A slur has been cast upon my daughter's character and on my

good name— we'll be the talk of London. What I want to know is— what do you intend doing about it?"

Tammy found her voice and rushed into the explanation, twice postponed. "Really, Daddy, Adam was in no way to blame. It was entirely my fault, I took out the *Dolphin* without checking the fuel level, consequently we were marooned for a few hours until a river patrol towed us ashore early this morning. And furthermore, Adam spent the night on deck and I slept in the cabin below!"

"I-believe you!" Jock roared, not one whit mollified, "but who else will?"

Adam intervened, full of cool disdain, "Do you need to worry about the workings of a few distorted minds?"

"Yes, by heaven, I do!" Jock flung back. "Away in your solitary fells you can feel immune to chattering tongues, but we'll have to live, eat, converse and socialise with them daily, and I can tell you now that in months to come when this episode has been long forgotten by you Tammy and I will still be bearing the brunt of sniggering remarks and sly, meaningful looks. You've compromised my daughter!" he blasted Adam in his most pompous, Victorian manner. "In days gone by such action would have been considered serious enough to provoke a feud!"

Somehow Tammy managed a croak of incredulity. "Oh, Daddy, how *ridiculous* . . .!"

Dancing with rage, Jock turned on her. "Go to your room," he commanded. "I have some straight talking to do to this young man!" Tammy stared at her father. In the past she had seen his anger directed towards others, but never had she been the object of his displeasure. The force of his fury was frightening; anxiously she noted veins on

his forehead so swollen they looked ready to burst. Breath was rasping harshly from his chest, apoplectic colour distorting his face.

"Daddy, you must calm down!" she pleaded, suddenly alarmed.

Her placating tone served only to incense him further. Incoherent with rage, he waved an arm in the direction of her room, indicating his insistence upon having his order obeyed. She hesitated, glanced at Adam, then followed the instruction of his fractional nod by walking slowly from the room.

For almost fifteen minutes she sat in her bedroom listening to her father's voice raised in anger and Adam's indistinguishable replies, moderate in tone, gradually smoothing the edge from the elder man's anger. Given time to reflect upon the outcome of her irresponsible action she felt bitter remorse. She had not foreseen her father's anguish, yet she ought to have done, because from childhood he had doted upon his only child who, if he had been a lesser man, he might easily have hated. Not for the first time in her life, Tammy yearned for the comfort and wisdom of a mother. Jock had spoiled her disgracefully, brushing aside the warnings of well-meaning friends by declaring that his child's capricious ways would eventually be usurped by the sound common sense she had inherited from her mother, a practical Yorkshirewoman upon whose strength Jock had leant heavily during twenty-odd years of their marriage. Tammy's birth had ended a partnership built upon years of love and trust. The child for whom they had both prayed came too late in life and inflicted the supreme sacrifice—her mother's life for that of her own.

Tears welled up in Tammy's eyes as she reflected upon the wealth of loving pride she had basked in every day of her pampered life. To assuage the agony of his loss, Jock had thrown all his energies into building up the business and the fruits of his labours had been showered upon her own undeserving head. And how had she repaid him? With one thoughtless prank she had betrayed his trust, shaken

his faith and silenced forever his proud boast that from the moment of her birth his Tammy had not caused him a moment's concern....

She was startled out of depressive thought by a rap upon the door and an authoritative voice demanding, "Miss Maxwell, come out, please, your father wishes to speak to you."

Her heart soared in response to Adam's call. Quickly she ran to open the door. He was standing on the threshold, his tall figure stiffly erect, tightly compressed lips matching the sternness of an outthrust jaw. She glanced past him to where her father sat sipping from a tumbler of brandy.

"Daddy, are you all right?" She flew to kneel at his feet, her frightened eyes scouring his unusual pallor.

He struggled to smile, yet his voice held a hopeful inflection when he nodded towards Adam. "Adam has explained everything, my dear. I must apologise to you both for the things I said—and for jumping to rather obvious conclusions."

"Adam has explained . . . ?" she echoed warily. She twisted round, searching for an answer in his impassive face.

"I can't understand why you found it so difficult to tell me how you both felt," Jock grumbled. "Some people might scoff at the notion of love at first sight, but I must have told you many times about my first meeting with your mother. I knew the instant I saw her that she was the only girl I wanted for my wife." He slid a caressing hand across Tammy's rigidly-held head. "Yes, those first hours of discovery can cloud a man's judgement and drive every other thought from his head." He chuckled. "I remember well our first meeting, we were attending a party and I volunteered to fetch her an ice. She was standing alone and shy in a corner of the room and when I returned, too shy myself to speak, our eyes met and we stood silently searching

each other's souls until someone jogged my elbow, sending melted ice-cream spilling down the front of her dress." Pain tugged at his mouth. He appeared for a moment to age before her frightened eyes. Then he shook himself free of painful memories and with a little of his customary sparkle addressed Adam.

"I think now would be a good time to take your advice. I'm feeling a little tired—like an old tub that's weathered a storm—so I'll lie down for a while and leave you, Adam, to seize the opportunity for which you've been waiting. Take courage, my boy, I have no doubt what her answer will be."

Tammy stared at Adam, barely conscious of her father leaving the room. He was pacing with the long, rangy strides of a man used to miles of solitary fellside, with beneath his feet the spring of turf, the crunch of bracken and acres of sweet-smelling heather. Within the confines of the overheated room he seemed caged—a cornered fox braced for the onslaught of baying hounds.

When, abruptly, he halted in front of her she flinched from the lancing thrust of dislike that lodged in her heart, severing a fragile thread of hope that he might, in time, begin to warm towards her.

"We shall have to marry." The harsh accusation ripped from his throat.

She quivered with shock. "Shall we... ?" The croaked whisper was a ploy to gain time—time desperately needed in order to sort out conflicting emotions of wild/runaway joy and dull, fearful despair bora of his grudging proposal. In the past many objects had caught her frivolous attention, but the knowledge that all that was needed was a negligent request to her father had blunted the edge of possession so that nothing, not even the costliest diamond nor the most fabulous fur, had evinced more than a passing enthusiasm—until now! She wanted Adam Fox with the fervour of

parched earth thirsting for water, corn aching for the warmth of ripening sun, a starving skeleton drooling over a crust of bread. Her passionate young body yearned to feel his touch, soft lips quivered an invitation to be kissed, wounded eyes promised a lifetime of devotion, if only . . .

His harsh voice whipped across her hopes, inflicting a scar that would never fade. "You realize, of course, that if you wish to retain your father's peace of mind there's no other way? I suspect you care little for convention and my outdated act of chivalry must be affording you a great deal of amusement, but scandal travels fast, even as far as the Cumbrian fells, and I too have my family's good name to consider. For centuries Fox has -been synonymous with justice, honour and high ideals, and I refuse to be the first one to dishonour the name. I insist that, for once in your selfish young life, you think of the well-being of others rather than yourself. You must agree to the alliance—you owe it to your father."

Entirely on his behalf, she forced a small protest. "But, Adam, you don't love me!"

"True," he cut in mercilessly, "not only that, our personalities, characters, social background and even our financial status are totally opposed, so it can hardly be claimed that we're perfectly matched."

Perversely, she argued, "Yet when the perfectly matched pair meet there's no guarantee that a lightning flash will ignite the spark of love."

He shrugged, irritated by her persistent harping on a theme that seemed to embarrass him. "Even scientists have difficulty defining love, it's all too often confused with feelings of sexual attraction, of pity, of wishful thinking brought about by an ache to belong to or to possess exclusively another human being. So how can one be sure what is really love?"

"When it comes to you you'll know," she choked. "When you thrill to someone's touch, to the sound of a certain voice, when all your senses are keenly alive to one other person."

"Perish the thought!" Brusquely he brushed aside her spate of words. "We do have one thing in common, however, we're both practical people. Bearing in mind your ultra-modern views, I feel sure you will not be insulted by the reminder that marriage today is no longer a sentence of bondage. A year from now, even less, we can begin casting out hints to your father that things are not working out between us. Gradually he'll become reconciled to the idea of divorce and the actual break-up won't come as too great a shock."

Tammy backed away, sickened by his detached, reasoning. Not for the world would she have betrayed the raw sensitivity of her feelings.

"Thanks for the proposal, but I don't fancy the idea," she cast flippantly across her shoulder as she headed from the room.

She-had almost reached the door when her shoulder was caught in a grip that seared her skin. Adam spun her round, then released her. Folding his arms across his 'chest, he fixed her with an intent stare.

"Like it or not, you will become my wife," he promised grimly. "Either willingly or unwillingly, the choice is yours. But if you should decide to fight me, bear in mind that I shan't be the first Fox to take a Maxwell woman by force!"

This was too much for Tammy's independent spirit to bear. "I don't know how many Maxwell women you've known in the past, but I can tell you now that I'm of a very different type! The man who possesses me will do so on my terms and on my say-so, not on his!"

An amused glint appeared in his eyes. "Maxwell women are reputedly mettlesome, yet history has proved them to be susceptible to an iron hand."

"Do you speak from experience?" Her curiosity was aroused.

"From a lifetime of repeated legend," he corrected quietly. "It may surprise you to know that you and I are descended from two Border families who for centuries, fought out the longest and most bitter feud of the many that took place between Border reivers. It began about the thirteenth century when great Border tribes, both English and Scottish, were feuding continuously amongst themselves. At that time, the two countries were supposedly at peace with one another, yet the Border was rife with robbery, blackmail, raiding, arson, kidnapping—all an accepted part of the social system. The land on either side of the Border was divided into Marches, three Scottish, three English, and no man living either side of that imaginary line could walk unarmed in safety. Houses had to be bolted and barred and a lookout posted each night for reivers who stole across the border to rustle cattle, rout their enemies, and, if the opportunity presented itself, to carry off their womenfolk."

Incredulous yet fascinated, Tammy urged him to continue. "And our families were on opposing sides, you say?"

"They most certainly were. The Maxwell family was the most powerful in the Scottish West March, plundering rogues who despoiled everything they touched—their name runs like a scar through Border history. My own family belonged to the English West March and my forebears are renowned throughout Cumbria for their long record of service to the crown, both as soldiers and March officers. I must admit that at one time it was rumoured that they used often to use their offices to cover their own raiding, but I've no doubt the rumour originated from their Maxwell neighbours."

"No doubt," she agreed scathingly. "It would be hard to imagine one such as yourself stooping to such levels!"

To her chagrin he accepted her statement at face value, either deliberately or unconsciously ignoring her sarcasm. Clenching her fists with exasperation, she studied the enigmatic descendant of an unusual race. Tough, reserved, almost contemptuous of fellow-countrymen not descended from men and women who had lived by the sword and who for centuries had manned a frontier stricken by raids, thefts and passionate feuds. His lean, supple limbs were inherited from quick-moving, lion-hearted fighting men who had handled their weapons with superb skill. Aristocratic pride showed in the arrogant tilt of his head, in the blade-straight nose, in the mouth that seldom bestowed a smile. And the far-seeing eyes, screened at the moment by thick, dark lashes, might have been those of a daredevil rustler, an implacable enemy searching out his foe, or a Fox man weighing up the merits of a Maxwell maid...

Marriage to such a man could mean a life of temperamental strife. Her will against his. Her demands— his refusals. Her wild spirit rebelling against his divine right to rule. The war of the reivers might well be revived centuries later—Fox versus Maxwell—inflicting cut for cut, a plundering of the senses carried on till death, giving no quarter and receiving none.

Yet upon the victor would be bestowed priceless spoils!

One doubt nagged her: Did she dare? Had she sufficient of her reiver ancestors' daredevil nerve?

CHAPTER FOUR

TAMMY'S super-powered sports car was eating up the motorway with Adam at the wheel. Sitting contentedly by his side, she almost purred with pleasure as pale Cumbrian sunshine filtered through the window and fell upon the band of gold encircling her finger, glistening brand new and bright as the hope in her heart. Not even clouds gathering on the horizon could dampen youthful optimism that refused to accept that everything she craved might not, in future, fall so readily into her lap.

Her most immediate ambition had been realized. She was Adam's wife. For seven hours she had been Mrs Adam Fox of Fox Hall, Cumbria! Every nerve end tingled as she savoured the joy of a new wife being transported swiftly by her new husband to her new home.

She cast him a gloating glance and thrust aside a momentary qualm as, quite unbidden, her subconscious mind compared, his profile with that of the stern contours of the land through which they were now passing. An hour ago they had left behind what had seemed to her to be the last outposts of civilization. Gradually buildings had become sparse, giving way to foothills. Still on the motorway, they had begun to climb and hills that earlier had been no more than a grey smudge on the horizon were, at close quarters, stern granite crags frowning resentfully down upon the sword of road slicing through their solitude.

High above, small, occasionally moving specks were identifiable as sheep grazing at seemingly impossible angles upon steeply rising slopes drenched by miniature waterfalls and chequered with low stone walls that stretched from base to peak. Curiosity impelled her to break the silence that had accompanied almost the entire journey.

"Why has it been found necessary to build walls down and across the mountains?"

"Hmmm . . .?" His impatient response sounded resentful of her intrusion into his process of thought. But when the question penetrated his absorption he smiled and at the same instant clouds parted, allowing sunshine to flood over the mountains.

"One of the most striking features of the fells are those old stone walls whose existence seems unjustified. Strangers often question the usefulness of walls apparently enclosing nothing, zigzagging across the skyline, encircling woods, or just built dead straight up the fellside. Unfortunately there's not a great deal known about them, but we've come to believe that they were meant as boundaries of one sort or another— fences between farms, parishes or counties, enclosures around manors or commons, and so on. It's been established that about one thousand years ago monks built the very first of the walls. Skilled farmers, they were the first to drain and cultivate the land hereabouts."

"Are you saying those walls are a thousand years old?" she gasped.

"Some are," he confirmed. "Others were constructed a mere hundred years ago. Nowadays, although the craft of dry stone walling has not been allowed to die, no new walls are built on the high fells, farmers keep their intake walls in good shape, of course, and construct sheepfolds as required, but few of them would dream of putting up a new fence of stone on the fell tops."

Tammy glowed beneath the warmth of a smile sparkling as the sun on glass. Greatly encouraged by his attitude, she asked him, "I'm hungry, could we stop somewhere for a meal?"

The clouds regrouped, swallowing up the sun. "I've been delayed long enough," he frowned. "We'll be home in a hour, surely you can last out till then?"

She swallowed a sharp retort. For three miserable days he had champed at the bit, begrudging every second of the time he had been required to spend in London in order to carry out arrangements for the wedding. The ceremony, which had taken place in the office of the local registrar, had been, at Adam's insistence, a spartan affair hustled through with the maximum of speed and the minimum of romanticism. Had it not been for her father there would have been no wedding breakfast, no flowers for the bride, not even a snapshot with which to look back upon the most important day of her life! Jock, too, had had inserted in one of the better newspapers a discreet intimation of his daughter's marriage, skilfully worded so as to create an impression that the marriage had been arranged for some time, thereby silencing the gossips and leaving Steve Harris with egg all over his face.

"Three days is hardly a lifetime!" she felt bound to protest. "Are you too indispensable to be allowed a few days' honeymoon? Haven't you a manager or something...?"

Adam did not even bother to glance her way, but pressed his foot down upon the accelerator to gain a sudden thrust of speed. "Honeymoons are for lovers, and we're hardly that!" he scathed. "And no, I do not have a manager, just two elderly aunts who'll have been coping as best they can, bless their hearts, even though, as Aunt Vinnie often says: 'Age has a good mind but sorry shanks.'"

She had heard his aunts mentioned previously, but not in depth. "What age are they? They brought you up, I believe?"

His brief nod made her feel she was intruding upon personal issues. "They moved in with us when my mother died a couple of years after I was born and were still with us when my father died five years ago. Naturally, my home is now their home. Being a couple of spinsters with no family other than my father and myself, they sold their cottage and made Fox Hall their permanent residence. During the

short duration of your stay," he stressed hardly, "you're in no way to upset their sense of security. Your appearance will be a great. shock to them, so I want you to make it plain from the very beginning that your presence will in no way affect their position."

"I will!" she assured him earnestly. "I have no wish to upset the sweet old dears."

He seemed to choke, then cleared his throat. "By the way, the subject of age is taboo. Although they're inclined to dwell a lot in the past they won't thank you for implying that they're senile." They left the motorway at a junction marked Carlisle, but instead of continuing towards the county's main town they took an exit on the roundabout that led to a road running through flat farming country, past isolated hamlets and neat, well-kept villages until, after an hour's drive, the ground began to rise steeper and steeper until finally, at the top of a particularly high rise, Adam stopped the car to let Tammy look her fill at the panorama spread out beneath them, encompassing the spires and chimneys of the town far to their right, miles of bleak fellside to their left and directly in front the outline of the Solway coast and the narrow strip of sea dividing English and Scottish neighbours.

"Not far now." His hand searched an inner pocket for his pipe. "Once through the village we'll be almost on our own doorstep."

"The village?" she queried, tearing her eyes from the narrow strip of sea, wondering if it were as deep, as chilling, as unbreachable as the gulf between Adam and herself.

"Caldbeck," he supplied. "The birthplace of John Peel of foxhunting fame—surely you've heard the song?"

She recalled it with pleasure. "Of course! D'you ken John Peel with his coat so gay..."

"Of grey," he corrected. "He wore a long grey coat with brass buttons and was reputed to be 'ter'ble lang in th' leg, lish, and wi' fine grey eyes that could see for ever'."

"Just like yours," she thought, allowing herself to drown in the blue depths, unaware that longing was depicted plainly on her face, on her trembling mouth, in limpid eyes pleading for one small glimmer of encouragement. She was no prude. Love, to her, was a delight to be shared—and she was a generous giver.

Undaunted by his aloofness, she snuggled against him, burrowing her head into his unyielding shoulder. "Adam," she reminded him gently, "we've been married for almost half a day, yet you haven't kissed me yet!"

She felt his shoulder jerk. Savagely she was pushed upright until the widest possible space yawned between them.

"Aren't you overlooking the fact that our marriage was arranged solely to silence gossiping tongues? You don't attract me and you never will," he spelled Out brutally, "but because of the debt I feel I owe your father I'm willing to put up with you for one year— though I doubt you possess enough depth of character or stamina to withstand the rigours of life as it's lived here for even that short time. Personally, I'm convinced you'll be haring back to London in no time—which will suit me just fine. However, while you remain, you will do well to remember that I'm contemptuous of feminine wiles. Here, men are bred to be hunters and look upon a woman's advances with suspicion, finding them as objectionable and as false to nature as they would a vixen attempting to coax hounds into her lair."

Not even the sight of lambs skipping about in fields by a riverside could ease the unfamiliar smart of rejection Tammy suffered for the rest of the journey. Adam's foot was pressing heavily on the accelerator, speeding the car along a road cutting through moorland

deserted except for colonies of grazing sheep. Fitful sun struggled to shine upon a glowering peak but was baulked by cloud gathering around its snow-flecked summit. After an hour-long drive through utter desolation she began to get more and more apprehensive. It did not seem possible that such a small overcrowded island as theirs could contain miles and miles of solitude devoid of human habitation, so soundless the silence echoed like a bell.

Often in London she had fretted within the claustrophobic atmosphere of teeming millions fighting for elbow room, and a trip in the *Dolphin* had been her escape route whenever the crush had become unbearable. Here were the solitude and silence she had often craved, so why did she feel fear, feel stripped of the polished sophistication so essential to modern living, subdued as a novice bowing humbly before some great unseen Presence?

"We're here!" Adam's relieved exclamation routed her fanciful thoughts and jerked her upright. The car was bumping over a rutted, stone-strewn drive leading up to a large house flanked by a couple of pele towers that gave it the look of a fortification, its slated roof stained with lichen and a massive oak door standing wide open to the chill north wind.

Tammy shivered as she stumbled from the car and turned hastily to grope for a heavy tweed coat flung casually across the back seat.

"You'll find it's two overcoats colder in the north." Adam sniffed the air appreciatively. "Don't let the sunshine fool you, there'll be snow on the high fells tonight."

She believed him, the ice-cold air had taken her breath away. As she teetered beside him on high wedged heels, wondering if she should offer to help him unload the luggage, a squeal of delight sent her spinning round so quickly she almost overbalanced.

"Adam! Dear boy ...! Vinnie, come quickly, Adam has arrived!"

"Aunt Honor!" Adam abandoned the cases and threw his arms around the small figure who ran towards him.

He's been away a mere three days! Tammy thought blankly, amazed by the rapturous welcome. Then while she watched a tall, angular figure hurried past her to firmly disengage the -smaller person whose arms were still clasped around Adam's neck. Clearly, she intended claiming her share of attention.

"You said you'd be away for only one day!" the tall one accused after bestowing a sharp peck upon his cheek. "A man responsible for a couple of thousand lambing ewes, hundreds of gimmers and hogs and three hundred wethers has no right staying away for three whole days!"

Tammy was fascinated by Adam's abashed look. He shuffled his feet, awkward as a schoolboy being taken to task. "I'm sorry about that, Aunt Vinnie, an unavoidable mishap caused my delay."

Tammy suffered an indignant blush; she had been called many things in her lifetime, but never an unavoidable mishap! Her toe began an impatient tattoo upon the gravel path. For all the notice they were taking of her she might be invisible. She coughed, a peremptory sound that focused all eyes upon her.

"Er . . . Aunt Vinnie—Aunt Honor . . ." Adam grunted, "this is Tammy ... my wife."

"Your *wife*!" Two voices echoed in unison, one high-pitched with excitement, the other dour with displeasure, but both startlingly amazed.

In order of importance he presented them. "Tammy, this is Aunt Lavinia—Vinnie for short." The old lady's eyes scoured. "And Aunt Honoria—naturally shortened to Honor." The second old lady glowed.

Honey and vinegar! Tammy's lips twitched with wry humour, then silently she scolded herself for forming hasty opinions. The simile was carried further, however, when Aunt Honor stepped forward and proffered her cheek. "Oh, my dear, I'm delighted that at last Adam has found himself a lovely young bride!"

The air crisped around them when it was Aunt Vinnie's turn to speak. Her critical eyes roved Tammy's slim, tweed-belted figure and lingered around her feet, seemingly confounded by the incongruous femininity of high-stacked platform shoes. "Can you actually walk in those ridiculous shoes?" she snapped, her top lip curling.

Tammy's heart plunged. Obviously this thin, sharp-featured creature with the stabbing eyes, unlike her small, rounded, apple-cheeked sister, had decided not to like her.

Her pert nose tilted. "Of course!" She demonstrated by stepping forward on to a sharp-edged lump of rock. Immediately she coped over and would have fallen but for Adam's swiftly outstretched hand.

"Pah!" was all the vocal expression Aunt Vinnie allowed herself, yet it was enough to ignite a flame of mortification in Tammy's cheeks.

"My goodness, I do hope you didn't hurt yourself," Aunt Honor fussed. "Come inside the house and rest your ankle—such fine-boned ankles you have, my dear," she admired, "altogether too delicate for our rough roads."

When she stepped inside the great hall Tammy felt she had retreated into another century. Tapestries, their woven themes obliterated by

age, hung heavily against walls of crumbling grey stone. Tattered banners lifted in the draught from the open doorway, the silken fabric so fragile she held her breath, fearful it might disintegrate. Slender, yard-long hunting horns of mellow brass hung aslant between oil paintings so darkened she had to peer closely in order to make out mounted horsemen quaffing stirrup cups being handed around by buxom serving maids with impatient hounds baying around their feet. A staircase bearing a wealth of beautiful carving progressed to unknown heights from a stone floor carpeted here and there with an assortment of animal pelts.

But the sitting-room into which she was led was as directly opposed to the hall as were the characters of the two aunts. Many hours of loving care had been spent putting a polished patina on oak furniture, old dressers, refectory tables and ladder-backed chairs that glowed warmly against cream-washed walls. Gay but faded chintz billowed at open windows framing magnificent views of towering fells and a large fireplace of green Lakeland stone contained leaping flames curling and spitting around a heap of aromatic logs. A carpet patterned in all the shades of autumn lent added warmth as well as providing comfort for a puppy basking in front of the open fire.

Eagle-eyed, Aunt Vinnie pounced. "Honor, how often must I tell you not to allow dogs inside the house?"

"Oh, but it's so cold outside, and it's only a puppy!"

"Outside with it!" Aunt Vinnie ordered, folding her arms as if prepared to do battle.

Tammy's temper rose. Obviously Aunt Vinnie was put out by Adam's arrival with an unknown bride and she intended taking out her spite on the defenceless puppy.

"Isn't he sweet!" She ran to kneel beside the slumbering puppy, a silver-coated labrador, all ears and feet and loose, unfilled skin. "Look," she cried when he rolled on his back pawing the air, "he's like an infant in an outsize overcoat!" Defiantly, feeling Aunt Vinnie's eyes boring into her back, she cradled him in her arms. "Beautiful baby," she crooned, "stay here with me."

"He'll do no such thing!" Aunt Vinnie snapped.

One could almost hear the clashing of swords.

Then Aunt Honor's voice crept timidly into the silence. "Vinnie, this is Adam's house, remember, and Tammy is his wife..."

"And an abstropolous one, at that!" Vinnie snapped back.

In -response to the questioning lift of Tammy's eyebrows Adam reluctantly translated: "Wayward."

Tammy nodded. "We Maxwells are noted rebels," she agreed sweetly.

Her words had the effect of a thunderbolt upon her listeners. Two pairs of horrified eyes swivelled in Adam's direction. "Did she say *Maxwell*?" Aunt Vinnie was outraged, Aunt Honor speechless. "You've brought a *Maxwell* bride to this house?"

Confirmation was supplied by Adam's unhappy embarrassment. Smothering a gasp of consternation, Vinnie spun on her heel and strode out of the room, her equally unhappy sister trailing in her wake.

Furiously Adam turned on her. "Did you have to blurt it out like that? I had meant to break the news gently, given an opportune moment."

Tammy stood up, still cradling the snoozing puppy. Earlier Adam had described her as an unfortunate mishap; now, it seemed, even her name had been meant to be kept a deep dark secret. The look she cast across the puppy's head was defiant and a little scornful.

"Are you so afraid of your aunts' opinions?"

He darkened, but his reply held no hint of temper. "Not afraid," he censured quietly, "I humour them a bit because I'm fond of them. Aunt Vinnie isn't half so fierce as she likes to pretend."

"She treats you like a naughty little boy," she scoffed.

He shrugged, his complacent grin infuriating her. "To them, I suppose I shall always be just that. To tell you the truth," he surprised her with a conspiratorial whisper, "I live in constant fear of being turned upside down and spanked!"

She traced his lordly height, the strong-hewn features fashioned out of generations of strife, the strong-willed mouth, stubborn chin, muscles that rippled when he moved, slim, taut thighs and arrogant stride, and in spite of herself a smile wavered on her lips as she considered the outrageous he. This man she had married possessed depths she might never fully plumb. This unsuspected humour was a pleasant bonus. Few men of her acquaintance had made her laugh, most had been too inward-looking, too conscious of the image they wished to project ever to lose themselves in laughter. But in Adam she sensed a secret well of humour that only a privileged few would be allowed to share.

"You're a surprising man," she gurgled. "A hard nut with a soft centre." She laid down the puppy and walked towards him, intrigued by the tension that became apparent as she drew near. He stood stiffly to attention as, greatly daring, she smoothed tentative palms across the lapels of his jacket. "You're so gallant and protective to those you

love, Adam." Her throat tightened. "I should like to think that some day I might merit the same consideration."

He was not entirely immune, she realized, fascinated by a muscle jerking at the corner of his mouth. A clock ticked away seconds of fraught silence. Tension quivered in the air like a raw nerve, painful, shocking.

A small curl of hope unwound itself in her heart. He disliked her, he despised her, but for the very first time he seemed conscious of her as a woman—as a desirable, attractive *wife*.

Greatly encouraged, she raised her mouth to his, wisping a kiss across his stern lips. A yearning ache filled her and when he did not respond she pressed her body closer to his, urging him to feed the fire of passion racing wanton through her eager young body.

"Please, Adam . . .!" Small sharp teeth bit tenderly into his chin. "*Please...*"

The oath that ripped from his lips was shocking.

"Stop that!" His push sent her staggering. "You're making this situation intolerable."

She strove to contain tears, breathing deeply. "Why, Adam, why? You're not as indifferent as you would have me believe. We could be happy together, we could make this marriage work if only you'll give it a try!"

His anger seemed directed not so much upon her as upon himself. "I admit that you can appeal to the flesh with your flirtatious love play, and like a huntsman in the heat of the day who stumbles across a cool spring, I could wallow in it. Fortunately, I have vanity to act as my brake. There's room for just one woman in my life and with her I must come first—with you, I fear, I'd merely be a fresh conquest at the tail end of a queue!"

CHAPTER FIVE

LEFT alone in the sitting-room, Tammy swallowed back tears of frustration and anger. Being snubbed and spurned were totally new experiences. As a young teenager she had quickly discovered and used to advantage her power over men, and they had succumbed by the dozen to the charm she had wielded like a baton, scurrying hither and thither to obey her bidding. Yet her heart had remained completely untouched.

"Why," she gritted, as with fists furiously clenched she glared through the window at the immovable crags, *"did I have to fall for a dour northern freebooter?"*

An apologetic cough preceded Aunt Honor's entry into the room. "We've prepared a room for you, my dear, if you'll come with me I'll show you where it is."

"That's kind of you, Aunt Honor—I do hope you don't mind me calling you Aunt?"

"Not at all!" Pleased colour brushed the old lady's cheeks. "You mustn't think," she stammered, "that we hold anything against you personally, it was just the shock of hearing the Maxwell name mentioned in this house."

Tammy stared. "Why ever shouldn't it be?"

"It's a long story," Aunt Honor mumbled, "and one I'm sure you don't want to hear. You're probably not even remotely connected with the same family."

"My father's family were the Maxwells of Annan- dale," Tammy told her gently.

"Oh, dear . . ." Aunt Honor's soft bottom Up quivered, "then you *are* a descendant of Black Jock...!"

Immensely intrigued, Tammy guided the trembling old lady towards a settee and sat down beside her.

"Won't you please tell me whatever it was that Black Jock did?"

Furtively Aunt Honor glanced around, as if half expecting her sister to appear. She began shaking her head, but then, held captive by Tammy's pleading eyes, she wavered. "Actually, it wasn't Black Jock himself but his daughter Meg..."

"Yes?" Tammy urged her on when she hesitated. "Do go on, you can't possibly stop now."

To her relief Aunt Honor settled herself more comfortably and continued. "Well, my dear, it happened centuries ago and I've no doubt the tale has lost little in the telling, but it's said that Black Jock's daughter took a great liking to one young James Fox and was so enamoured of him she went to unbelievable lengths to gain him as a husband. It must have been love at first sight, because then there was no possible way they could have met socially. The two families were bitter enemies who took turns to raid and plunder one another's lands. Have you heard of the Border reivers, my dear?" she questioned suddenly.

"Adam sketched the bare outlines," Tammy nodded.

"That was such a romantic period in our history," Aunt Honor sighed blissfully, "it makes my blood run faster just to think of it. Often I close my eyes and imagine I can hear the echo of jingling spurs and can almost see the moss troopers driving home their spoils in the 'lee licht o' the mune'. The reiver fought hard,

drank hard and loved with the same enthusiasm as he fought and drank. He was a good true friend and a bitter enemy, never one to forget an injury and never one to turn his back upon one in need. A whole clan was shamed if ever one of its name broke faith with friend or foe. To some, that period may seem a time of foolhardy chivalry, of brave deeds misdirected, of young lives needlessly cut short, yet there's no true son or daughter of the Border who is not proud to claim descent from one of those who raided the Marches in those far off days. To the Scottish reivers there was never a time when the English ceased to be regarded as enemies, from wherever the blue line of Cheviot hills was in sight Scot and English hated one another—hence the feuding and plundering raids."

"So the English did their share of raiding, too?" Tammy queried, eyebrows raised. "According to Adam, only the Scots raided the law-abiding English!"

Aunt Honor shook her head and smiled. "That can hardly be so, my dear, not when it was during a Fox raid on Maxwell territory that the girl I spoke of earlier first set eyes upon our ancestor, James Fox. Young James was captured red-handed lifting Maxwell cattle and was condemned by Black Jock to be hanged on the gallows tree which no family of any standing was without. Then Jock's daughter, young Meg, stepped forward to plead with her father to spare James's life. Only hours previously, she said, he had come upon her walking alone and had taken her by force. The defiant young reiver protested his innocence, but Black Jock wouldn't listen and gave his captive a choice between hanging and matrimony. To young James the latter must have seemed the lesser evil, because reluctantly, under the very shadow of the gallows, he agreed to marry Meg Maxwell even though, at that time, it had been ordained by English law that 'it be March treason for a Borderer, man or woman, to intermarry with Scots borderers'." Aunt Honor patted Tammy's knee. "Perhaps now you can understand our deep mistrust of the Maxwell clan? Not that

you need worry," she twinkled. "I'm certain you had no need to stoop to such trickery in order to wed Adam."

Tammy lifted a cool hand to shame-scorched cheeks, wondering how the old lady would react if she should reveal how the practical joke she had practised upon Adam had resulted once more in the wrath of a paternal Maxwell falling upon a Fox's head. Certainly Adam had not had the gallows to contend with, but—she shifted uneasily—he must surely have weighed up and considered carefully the drastic effect her father's withdrawal from their business deal would have upon the consortium of farmers he represented.

Marriage, or bankruptcy for himself and his friends! That was the choice Adam had been offered, and like his early ancestor he had opted for the lesser of the two evils!

"What happened to James and Meg?" she croaked the agonised question.

Aunt Honor's absent expression was replaced by concern at the sight of Tammy's distress. "Why . . .!" she caught her breath, "you must be a romanticist at heart, despite your modern ways. I wouldn't have repeated the legend had I known it would cause you such upset. . . Not much more is known about James and Meg except," her tone became droll, "that they had three daughters and seven sons."

She began to laugh and after stunned seconds Tammy joined in, shakily at first, then with less restraint as the message sank in. "Oh, Aunt Honor," she stuttered as they laughed together enjoying the joke, "wouldn't it be f-f-funny if history should decide to repeat itself!"

A voice sharp with asperity sliced through their merriment. "Adam has taken your luggage upstairs, no doubt you'll be wanting to unpack?"

Aunt Honor rose quickly to her feet. "We were just coming, Vinnie. I'm afraid I kept Tammy back with my rambling tongue.

"I believe you," her sister snorted, eyeing Tammy from the doorway as if expecting her to sprout a second head.'

Annoyed by Aunt Honor's subservience, Tammy's chin jutted. "There's plenty of today not even touched yet!" she crisped. "Besides, surely there's a maid who can unpack my things ?"

Aunt Vinnie's angular body seemed to stretch a further foot. "Indeed there is not! As long as you're here you will do for yourself."

Tammy shrugged. "Oh, very well, lead the way."

But it was Honor who escorted her upstairs and timidly informed her, "We had thought at first that you would be sharing the main bedroom with Adam, but he insisted you would need a room of your own with plenty of cupboard space, so we've put your things in the bedroom adjoining his. Even so," she looked doubtful, "I doubt if there'll be enough space—you seem to have brought an enormous amount of luggage."

Tammy was surprised. Three-quarters of her wardrobe had been left at the flat after Adam's insistence that she bring with her only the bare essentials.

The bedroom she had been allocated had a window overlooking a magnificent sweep of fellside glowing bracken gold under a slowly setting sun. A huge four- poster bed piled high with bedcovers gave rise to the suspicion that the hastily-lighted fire crackling feebly in the fireplace would do little to dispel chill winds that would sweep down from ice-capped peaks to penetrate every crack and crevice in the old walls.

Wood panelling and heavy velvet curtains combined to add an aura of comfort, however, and the stretch of fitted wardrobe seemed amply spacious to accommodate her needs.

Aunt Honor stooped to feed more coal to the smoking fire. "In another half hour the heart will glow red, then you'll begin to feel the benefit," she counselled kindly. "A fire in the bedroom is a great luxury, usually we only light one if anyone is laid up sick."

"Then you shouldn't have gone to all that trouble for me," Tammy protested, perturbed by the extra work piled upon already overburdened shoulders. "I'm young and healthy, if you and your sister can survive without a fire then so can I."

"Adam insisted, my dear." Honor's simple statement implied that no further argument was necessary. "I'll leave you to get dressed now," she straightened. "Dinner will be ready in about half an hour, no doubt you and Adam will both be ready for it."

The bathroom was along the corridor and as Tammy slipped inside she sniffed, made immediately aware by the smell of coal tar soap that Adam had recently made use of the antiquated bath, its enamelled surface scoured so often black patches had been laid bare, with ancient bulbous taps through which tepid water gushed loud and erratic. Casting a wistful mind back to her own luxurious bathroom with a temperature in which tropical plants flourished, she took a quick plunge, then stepped hastily on to a bare cork bathmat, groping for a towel in which to encase her shivering limbs.

After a brisk rub she dashed back to her bedroom, flung on her warmest underwear, then a long-sleeved dress of topaz coloured wool. A light dusting of makeup, a quick smoothing of a comb through her brown cap of hair, then a pair of topaz earrings to add the finishing touch.

Adam was waiting in the sitting-room. "Ah, I see you've dressed for dinner—I meant to warn you, but I forgot. A silly waste of time, I call it, but the aunts insist upon being formal after eight even though there's no one to see us. As you will no doubt have noticed, they stick to old traditions as if they'd been ordained only yesterday."

"I like that," Tammy smiled, accepting the glass of sherry he handed her. "'Remove not the ancient landmark which the fathers have set'."

His dark eyebrows drew together at this reference, surprised, Tammy shrewdly guessed, by her knowledge of the Bible.

"Myself, I think it's more a case of allowing the dead to govern the living," he shrugged, shying away from the vision of loveliness pressing close as an extra rib to his side. "The aunts are ready to serve dinner," he threw curtly across his shoulder, "we'd better not keep them waiting."

Tammy's spirits rose as she led the way into the dining-room where the aunts were hovering. She had glimpsed a breach in Adam's defences; each time she moved close to him he shied away with a speed that would seem to indicate that his barrier of indifference was made of far less stern stuff than she had thought.

She sent the aunts a beaming smile as she slipped into a chair and accepted a helping of stuffed herring garnished with mustard sauce.

"Good plain fare is all you'll get here," Aunt Vinnie almost accused. "Once you've tasted Cumberland ham, Solway salmon and tasty Herdwicke mutton you'll turn up your nose at fancy frills. By the way," she addressed Adam with a suddenness that arrested the fork half way to his lips, "how did your business go in London? Did you manage to get the farmers a better deal?"

Carefully Adam lowered his fork. "I did, thanks to Tammy's father. He's offered to take all the wool we can supply at a price very much better than that we've recently been offered at auction."

"And why should he be doing that?" Immediately Aunt Vinnie seized upon the question that had been bothering Adam. "I'm not quite sure," he replied thoughtfully, "I explained to him how myself and the rest of the fell farmers were in danger of going bankrupt because of the poor prices being offered for our fleece. There's been a fall in the demand for wool," he told Tammy, "synthetic fibres which are both cheaper and longer-lasting have cornered the market, consequently we're being offered less for our wool than the cost of feeding the animals."

"This man ..." Aunt Vinnie interrupted.

"Jock Maxwell—Tammy's father and my father-in-law," Adam rebuked coldly.

She screwed up her face, obviously pained by the need to mouth the name. "This Jock Maxwell is a businessman, is he not, so why has he agreed to pay twice what is necessary for his supplies?"

"Perhaps he has a soft spot for fell farmers," Adam offered lamely. "Maybe my plea for justice touched a nerve."

"Pah!" Aunt Vinnie stood up and began gathering up the empty plates. "There was never a Scotsman born that cared owt for justice so long as his own pockets were being lined. And a Maxwell with a soft spot is as rare as snow in the desert. But none of them's daft, I'll grant you that! Be wary, Adam, of a Maxwell's helping hand, I swear that sooner or later you'll discover his generosity hides an ulterior motive!"

Tammy choked with indignation. She pushed aside the plate of ham Aunt Honor had placed before her and glared furiously across the table at Aunt Vinnie. "How dare you say such a thing! My father is the most generous of men, always ready to extend a helping hand!"

"To his own kith and kin, mebbe, but never to an Englishman, and especially not to a Fox!"

Tammy felt herself floundering in a bog of ancient enmity and tribal loyalties she had thought extinct centuries earlier. Suppressing her impatience with difficulty, she tried to reason.

"The Scots and the English are no longer at war. The petty jealousies, the family vendettas, the feudal laws all died out years ago when the frontier became bridged by ties of blood kinship through marriage and mutual trust born of business alliances such as the one Adam and my father intend to operate. Intermarriage has taken place to such an extent that I doubt there's any Border Scot who doesn't have English family ties. There's little about the surrounding countryside, in the lonely hills or the solitary valleys, to suggest that this was once a bloody battleground, rustling and pillaging seems so out of place and remote that it's hard to imagine that this was once badman's territory carved up between Border barons and Scottish outlaws."

Surprisingly, it was Aunt Honor who disagreed, contradicting in a dreamy tone that matched the faraway look in her eyes. "Oh, no, my dear, that isn't so! The past lives all around us, the cries of the reivers are carried on the wind, captured in the whispering becks, and mourned by sad trees hanging their heads in still, fathomless waters. And at night especially, when there's a full moon and a wind strong enough to send black clouds scurrying across the tops of the crags the beasts become restless. Seemingly for no reason at all, hounds begin to bay, panicky sheep run in packs across the fellsides, the fox ceases to prowl and hurries back to his lair—all because of ghostly noises only they and a handful of humans can hear—the clash of steel

against steel, the full-throated roar of a man bearing down upon his enemy, the last dying gasps of an enemy impaled upon a sword of steel..

Tammy shuddered, impressed in spite of herself by the intensity of the old lady's beliefs. As her eyes met Adam's she read in them a warning not to scoff but to follow his example of kindly tolerance. Sadly, she retired from the argument, defeated by a hard core resistance to reason that words could never penetrate.

CHAPTER SIX

SHORTLY after midnight Tammy awoke shivering with cold. The fire was a pile of burnt-out ash and the air in the room, when she poked a cautious nose from out of the bedcovers, had an icy chill. Moonlight flooded through undrawn curtains and outside she could see the mass of crags, their irregular outlines sharply defined.

She hugged the weight of blankets closer around her shivering body, longing for the comfort of her feather- light duvet and the hothouse temperature of her London flat. She felt unhappy, disheartened and more miserable than she had ever felt in her life before. After dinner Adam had excused himself saying he had to attend a meeting of the consortium and the two aunts had retired early, leaving her with only a radio for company and a library full of books whose contents, Aunt Vinnie had declared, dealt mainly with Border history and would be bound to improve her mind...

She had browsed through them, but feeling too keyed up to read had settled in an armchair to wait for Adam's return. But by eleven o'clock the chill of a room growing gradually colder as the fire embers died had driven her upstairs to bed.

She tensed as a sound caught her ear; it was the creaking of a floorboard outside of her room and as she listened to soft footfalls progressing along the passageway, then stopping at the door of the adjoining room, she relaxed against her pillows, relieved that Adam was finally home.

Wide awake, she toyed with the idea of tapping on the communicating door, then rebelled. Why should she? Adam was her husband, he had no right to keep a closed door between them on the first night of their honeymoon. Almost without volition, she slipped out of bed and ran across to the door, but when she tried to turn the knob it would not budge, it was locked from the other side.

She tapped on the panel. "Adam, let me in!"

Movement next door ceased suddenly, then she heard approaching footsteps.

"What do you want?" She almost backed in fright from the furious hiss. "It's late, you ought to be asleep."

Swallowing her humiliation, she forced through chattering teeth, "I must speak to you, but I refuse to carry on a conversation with a closed door between us, so open it, please."

Adam's mutter of exasperation was audible as he turned the key in the lock. When the door swung open he remained on the threshold staring aghast at Tammy's shivering form bathed in moonlight, soft, rounded curves swirled around by a mist of white diaphanous chiffon.

"Good lord!" His reaction was most unflattering. "Have you nothing more substantial to put on?"

She had, but she had no intention of admitting it. She had taken a great deal of trouble choosing her trousseau and nothing, not even this cold, unfriendly territory that bred equally unfriendly men, could have persuaded her to abandon the froth of chiffon and lace in favour of more serviceable nightwear.

When his glance slewed past her to a spot above her head she knew he was not entirely unaffected.

"Well, what is it you want?" he demanded curtly. "It's time we were both in bed."

Forcing herself to be brazen, Tammy reached out to clutch his arm and with her face pressed against his shirt front whispered. "Yes, Adam, I think so too."

A breath rasped harshly from his throat, then hands that were anything but loving descended upon her shoulders and proceeded to shake her thoroughly.

"Damn you, Tammy," he gritted, "you must stop all this, d'you hear? What the hell are you trying to prove—that anything Tammy Maxwell wants she can get?"

Flushed and breathless, she tossed her head and stared defiance into his angry face. "I'm Tammy *Fox* and all I want is my husband's love, the feel of his arms around me—is that too much to ask?"

Granite-stern, he took hold of her chin and held it within two fingers while forcibly he spelled out, "Spoiled, provocative brat! The only charm I hold for you is the charm of the unattainable. Because a doting father has granted your every wish you expect the same of a husband! But that's not my way," his grip tightened unbearably. "I want a wife who'll put my needs first, who will make me her main consideration, who'll work side by side with me in all weathers, if necessary,

in all manner of jobs, without complaining of feeling cold, getting dirty, or being tired. You simply haven't got what it takes," his eyes took on a mocking glint as they raked her from head to foot. "I don't doubt but what we would be compatible in bed, my dear, but I'm in no position to indulge in the luxury of a mistress—I need a twenty-four-hour wife, not a flirtatious young coquette with whom to while away my few leisure hours."

In her besotted state she was able to ignore his scorn and concentrate eagerly upon the conditions he had outlined. "I'll work with you, Adam, I'll do anything you ask of me. I enjoy cooking and cleaning, I'll economise—"

"By painting your own fingernails?" he mocked, laughter lurking behind his words.

Maxwell temper raised its head. She had abased herself to this arrogant fellside baron, metaphorically crawled on her knees for his favours, and in return had been rewarded with nothing but sneers and contemptuous rejection. Yet she did not intend to admit defeat, not even with a sword tip of scorn pricking her throat. All that was needed was a change of tactics!

Her low moan of distress sounded authentic even to her own ears and as she slumped against his chest he had no option but to grab her wilting body in his arms.

"What's wrong?" They had been hissing at each other in whispers, but alarm caused him to forget that he could be overheard and his voice became louder, tight with concern as he urged, "Tammy, for heaven's sake, tell me what is the matter?"

"I'm so c-c-cold," she moaned.

"Damnation! It would be surprising if you weren't!"

She hid a smile in his shoulder when he whipped her from her feet and carried her across to his bed where he threw back the top cover and deposited her in a nest of down-soft blankets. He began massaging her limbs gently to get the circulation flowing, and it was terribly difficult to pretend a frozen state when at each touch of his fingers blood ran scalding through her veins.

She almost chuckled, reflecting that in the past she had had to fight her way out of such situations and not into them, but just in time she remembered to moan and to project a convulsive shiver through her limbs.

"Hold me closer, Adam, I think I'm going to faint..."

Completely deceived, he lifted her against his heart and began massaging more vigorously. Shivering with sheer physical ecstasy, she clung to him as, clinically absorbed in his task, he continued, unaware of the measure of his success until soft arms entwined around his neck and a pair of pouting lips began exploring his stern profile.

He stiffened, suddenly realizing he had been manoeuvred into a close embrace. Fleetinglly, Tammy wondered if he were angry, then decided she did not care, not when she could feel the heat of his touch all over her body, not when she could hear his sharp intake of breath that told her he was very much aware of her as an attractive female, as a vibrant, very willing young bride!

She made the most of those few moments, expecting at any second the usual sharp rejection and a spate of condemning words. When they did not come she dared to open her eyes and felt almost terrified by the lick of blazing blue passion she had aroused. She knew she had won when thickly he murmured her name, his tone somnolent as the drowsy groan of a newly aroused tiger.

Bending close, he began lowering her slowly on to the bed. She sank into the downy nest and held out inviting arms. His groan of surrender was smothered against her lips as he kissed her, a long, draining kiss that plundered her of every other need except that of giving herself body and soul to this stubborn man whose will she had worked so hard to bend.

"I adore you," she whispered against his ear, and felt him quiver. She waited for a pledge from him, feeling convinced that his offhand attitude had been merely part of some deliberate punishment he had decided to inflict upon her as a warning that his independent spirit must not be contained. This wild man of the mountains whose spirit

had to be free as a hawk swooping through the skies resented any type of fetter—physical, emotional or matrimonial. His reticence had been a barrier placed between himself and the attraction she held for him, but the barrier had been trampled, the wild mountain hawk was now eager to eat out of her hand!

In his arms she experienced a coming-alive of the senses, it was as if emotions lain dormant for years were suddenly brought to life by the thrill of demanding kisses. She revelled in his power, returning kiss for kiss, thrilling to his caresses. This was the moment for which she had remained pure—the fast before the feast—this feast of passionate togetherness she was to share with the reckless-eyed man who looked ready to devour her.

She had thought him completely captivated until with one of his sudden, vigorous movements, he clutched her hard against his chest and roughly condemned,

"Tempting, conniving little witch! You planned my downfall deliberately. Yet how can I take advantage of a child—a child who nevertheless possesses the ability to drive a man out of his wits? Are you woman enough, I wonder, to stand the consequences of your actions? Or am I being naive? Perhaps your confidence stems from experience?"

"Don't doubt me, Adam," she begged. Enclosing his lean, hard cheeks between her palms, she mutely pleaded for stormy blue eyes to soften. The face she held up to him was aglow with newly-conceived maturity, she was ready as never before to give herself completely into the hands of a man. Shyly, tentatively at first, she tried to explain the reticence that had caused raised eyebrows and a certain amount of spiteful amusement amongst her more liberated friends.

"I was never able to contemplate the idea of living in a perpetual state of promiscuity, even though the pressures to do so were great. I

wanted a lasting union with one man and one man only, but up until the day I met you there was no one with whom I felt the least inclination to share the rest of my life. Yet, instinctively, I felt certain that some day the man I wanted would turn up, and in my desire to keep myself only for him I became so solitary I developed a dislike of being touched in even the most impersonal way by casual acquaintances."

His possessive hands suddenly stilled. He released her, holding only her glance with his probing eyes. "Touch is man's easiest method of communication," he told her slowly, "through it, he can express emotions such as love, hate, reverence and contempt."

He did not say which had motivated his rough handling and she did not ask, all she knew was that his withdrawal had deprived her of delight too new to be relinquished.

"Kiss me, darling ..She snuggled close, daring to tantalize the descendant of adventurers who had made their living by plunder.

With typical reiver dash, Adam reacted by pulling her into a savage embrace and swooping down upon her upturned mouth, growling a laugh when he felt her quiver. He kissed downcast lids too shy to rise, the tip of a nose completely devoid of impudence; a small, once-stubborn chin now dimpled with delight and ears straining to catch the endearments being uttered so hoarsely they sounded almost lik'e curses. He took his time, driving her emotions to distraction with exploratory lips.

"How can I be sure it will last...?" he murmured, nuzzling gently against her throat. "What guarantee do I have that you won't tire of me as easily as you've tired of all the others?"

"There's been no others," she assured him earnestly, "at least, none that counted. I fell in love with you at our very first meeting, even Daddy noticed and commented upon it, he even went so far as to—"

The nuzzling stopped. "Yes, he even went so far as to do what?"

In her blissful ignorance she shyly told him, "To make an offer tempting enough to keep you in London, thereby giving us time to get to know one another better."

She was released with shocking suddenness. "A sprat to catch a mackerel! I should have known better than to trust a Maxwell!"

Tammy could hardly believe that the stern tone was issuing from lips that only seconds earlier had been murmuring throaty endearments against her warm skin.

"True to form, you saw something you wanted and doting Daddy bought it for you!"

"No, no!" Panic-stricken, she tried to undo the harm wrought by her thoughtless admission. "He was only trying to help."

"Help you get what you coveted," he spat. "Well, up until now you've seen only the better side of my nature, let's see how you like the worst!"

He pulled her upright, then flung her across his knee to administer a stinging, humiliating spanking that brought cries of anguish to her lips. Uncaring of the aunts' scandalized ears, she yelled a protest, wriggling, scratching and biting in an effort to avoid the painful chastisement. A dozen vigorous slaps were administered before Adam considered her suitably punished, then she was thrown across his shoulder with less concern than he would have shown a piece of baggage, transported into her bedroom, and heaved contemptuously

on to the bed. Then he strode out, sparing not a backward glance for the sobbing heap of confusion pounding clenched fists into her pillow, fervently muttering between sobs vows of retribution and revenge that would have gladdened the hearts of her feuding ancestors.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TAMMY went down to breakfast next morning with her plan of campaign all mapped out. She was going to work on the crack in Adam's defences, stick as close to him as an extra rib, throwing everything she had learnt about the art of seduction into the battle against her husband's stubborn defences. Meg Maxwell had managed to overcome such opposition, so why shouldn't she? And if, on the way, she should manage to pay him back by flicking his pride or by embarrassing him a little then it would be some small recompense for the indignities he had inflicted upon her the previous night.

She met Aunt Vinnie in the hall. Something about her tight smile made her conscious that the cries from her bedroom had not gone unheard.

"Where's Adam, Aunt Vinnie?" Tammy tilted her chin, suppressing a tide of colour.

"Out on the fells giving instructions to his shepherds as he should be! The ewes will be lambing in a week or two and in the meantime the mothers-to-be have to be coaxed down from the fells into the fields around the homestead. The next few weeks will be hectic for Adam, he'll have no time for you. Not that he couldn't do with a wife," momentarily her old eyes grew tired, "especially at clipping time when there are dozens of hungry men to be fed." She drew erect, the minute weakness overcome. "There are dozens of Dales lassies who would have been glad to become Adam's wife," she clamped, "strong, healthy girls who know everything there is to know about a fell farmer's life. But no, he had to go and saddle himself with a silly flibbertigibbet such as yourself!"

When she stomped away Tammy hurried in the opposite direction, her cheeks flaming, a hasty retort burning the tip of her tongue. Had it

not been for the glimpse of tiredness Aunt Vinnie had betrayed she would have suffered the full lash of Maxwell temper!

Aunt Honor's face lit up when Tammy walked into the kitchen. Her greeting was in soothing contrast to her sister's acidity.

"Good morning, my dear, I hope you slept well— er..." she caught an embarrassed breath, "what I mean is..."

Good nature restored, Tammy poured out a cup of tea from a brown earthenware pot and helped herself to sugar. "What you mean," she twinkled, "is that you heard me yelling when Adam spanked me last night. Don't worry about it, I intend to get my revenge."

Aunt Honor was rubbing fat into flour for pastry. At Tammy's words her busy fingers halted as, wide-eyed, she considered the strange reply.

"I'm not going to pry, Tammy, my dear," she watched Tammy munching stolidly through a wad of toast, "but from what you've just said it sounds to me as if your marriage to Adam is destined to be as stormy as that of James and Meg."

"It does seem to be running along parallel lines at the moment," Tammy agreed, "but like Meg, I intend winning in the end."

The skin around Aunt Honor's mouth creased into a thousand tiny laughter lines. "Then good luck to you, my dear, and if ever you should need help don't be afraid to ask."

Tammy finished off her tea and strode around the table to enclose the old lady in a hug of gratitude. "Thank you," she pecked her cheek, "I'll need every ally I can get. Now, tell me where I might find Adam."

Aunt Honor crossed over to the window and pointed upward with a doubtful frown. "There's a shepherd's hut near the summit of the fell, but I wouldn't advise you to try to reach it on your own. There's slippery shale on the way up, and anyway, Adam might have left by the time you get there. No, walking on the fells is far too dangerous for a newcomer, your best plan would be to wait until he returns."

"Which will be about lunchtime?" Tammy queried, disappointed.

"Bless you, no! It's all of a day's work contacting the shepherds and checking on the flocks. He's taken sandwiches and a flask, we're not expecting him home until evening."

"I can't waste a whole day, Aunt Honor, surely you can see that ? There must be some way I can reach him!"

"Well," Aunt Honor pondered, "there's just a faint chance that he might call in at the inn in the valley. Farmers hereabouts make it their meeting place if they're out for the day and generally call in to have a pint of beer with their sandwiches. I suspect Adam could be heading in that direction and if he follows his usual custom he should be there about lunchtime. But it is a long walk and there's no guarantee that you'll get a lift back, hadn't you better take the car?"

"No, I feel like walking," Tammy decided, "just write down the directions while I slip upstairs and change my shoes."

The route could not have been simpler. A road ran from Fox Hall, curving and winding along the whole length of the glowering black fell dominating the valley. "Keep to the road and you can't miss it," Aunt Honor assured her, "the inn is the only building for miles around."

Tammy decided to take the puppy, christened Silver, along for company and she set off down the drive with the puppy dancing at her

heels. Her spirits soared high as the hawk she watched hovering overhead, vividly outlined against a brilliant blue sky. Most of the snow had disappeared from the fells, but the wind seemed to be swinging round towards the north and the cold nip in the air urged her to step lively. The sun smiled on the dour fell, treeless and plantless, utterly solitary except for a few sheep and an occasional bird. Tammy smiled back, feeling a kinship.

"Silver!" She called to the puppy who was lagging behind and felt outstandingly rewarded when he responded with a bound.

But after walking for an hour her steps began to flag. A blister was forming on her heel and Silver who, half an hour earlier, had sat down squarely and refused to budge, seemed to weigh a ton as he dozed blissfully inside her jacket. She was beginning to wish she had accepted Aunt Honor's offer of sandwiches. She had declined, convinced that she would get something to eat at the inn, but as yet it was nowhere in sight and besides pangs of hunger her thirst was aching to be slaked.

She trudged on for a further half hour, hardly daring to think of the return journey. "I might get a lift back," she murmured to herself, then shook her head. All the time she had been walking not one vehicle had passed her. Then far ahead she caught sight of a building that was bound to be the inn. Her steps quickened and as she neared she began gradually to make out a sign painted with dogs, horses and riders and underneath the welcome words: Sportsmen's Inn.

It was no more than a converted house with a tiny front room containing six small tables with empty ashtrays set out upon each shiny surface. It was completely empty. From along a passageway leading towards the back of the house Tammy heard voices and as she strode in the direction of the sound a woman stepped out of a doorway on her right and held out a detaining hand.

"Lounge on the left, dearie, the bar is for men only."

"But I'm looking for my husband, do you know if he's here?"

Slowly, the cheerful-looking landlady took in Tammy's elegant, French-cut slacks, hand-made leather shoes and Swiss-embroidered anorak. "I shouldn't think so," she twinkled, "but if you tell me his name I'll find out."

Just then Tammy heard Adam's resonant voice dominating the conversation. "That's Adam!" she assured the landlady, whose mouth dropped agape. "I needn't trouble you, I'll find the way myself."

She left the surprised woman staring after her and hurried down the passageway to step inside a long, low-ceilinged room which had obviously once been the kitchen but which now had a roughly constructed bar stretching across the width of the fireplace. Wooden forms were ranged around the remaining three walls to accommodate the dozen or so men who were sitting amiably chatting over foaming tankards, raising clouds of smoke from ancient pipes, most of them with collie dogs lying patiently at their feet.

Tammy erupted into the room and at the sight of her conversation was cut off as if by a knife. Adam was propping up the bar with his back towards her, but he swung round, following the direction of his companions' surprised stares.

A rush of dull colour ran under his tan. Standing poised in the doorway, Tammy realized that her moment of revenge had come. The expressions around her were indicating different shades of affront at her intrusion into an all-male domain—she could hardly wait to add fuel to the fire of male chauvinism!

"Adam, *darling*...!" Before a dozen pairs of startled eyes she ran towards him and flung her arms around his neck, pressing her mouth to his in a long, passionate kiss.

Surprise held him rigid, then hard hands clamped her waist and she was forcibly heaved away and set squarely out of reach. Thunderous with embarrassment and terribly conscious of his companions' stony silence, he had no option but to growl an introduction..

"Er . I'd like you all to meet my wife, Tammy. Tammy, these are a few of our neighbours . .."

She listened with awe as he reeled off a string of names that sounded like a roll of honour. The previous night she had browsed through Pitcairn's *Criminal Trials*, a book that recorded more accurately than Debrett the records of the chief Border families and those pledged to them. The names Adam was calling out were the same as those that had been written: Lowther, Curwen, Salkeld, Dacre, Routledge, Noble, Musgrove ... The last man, Adam's companion, was introduced as Tom Harden. He seemed nonplussed, very much put out by Adam's sudden acquisition of a wife.

"How do you do," he bowed gravely. "I hope you won't find this vicinity too remote, but if ever you're feeling the need of company you must ride over to my house. I know my daughter Pam will be eager to make your acquaintance."

The silence became even more intense. The girl's name quivered in the air, going from lip to lip, murmured in undertones and from behind sheltering hands. Tammy's scalp prickled. This Pam, whoever she was, had some significant connection with Adam!

Tension was broken by an old man sitting in a corner. "Women!" he spat contemptuously. "Is there no place we can go to be rid of them?"

Ignoring Tammy's indignant look, Adam, instead of rebuking the old man for his rudeness, took her firmly by the elbow and began guiding her out of the bar. She fumed even more when he halted at the doorway and turned to apologise.

"You must excuse my wife's intrusion, she doesn't yet understand our ways. Given time she will come to accept that in our part of the world women are not allowed to intrude upon male gatherings. However, she'll soon learn..."

As he bundled her into the passageway she protested, "But I'm thirsty and I haven't had a drink yet!"

Looking very grim, he opened a door and thrust her inside the small front room she had peeped into earlier. "Very well, sit in there. What would you like to drink?"

"A lager, please," she requested politely, her manner so docile her father would immediately have suspected guile. While waiting for Adam's reappearance she hauled the sleepy Silver from his nesting place and placed him on the floor, ignoring his squeaking protest, then when he returned carrying a solitary glass she cocked an enquiring eyebrow.

"Aren't you going to join me?"

"No." He folded his arms across his chest and took up a stance of angry impatience. "I can't spare the time."

"You never have any time to spare for me, Adam." She sipped the lager, biding her time.

"I'll have even less in future," he rapped. "How dare you make a fool of me in front of my friends with that ridiculously emotional greeting! You did it deliberately, didn't you?" he glittered. "Ah, I see I'm right."

Her defensive blush had not escaped his notice. "It was a well-thought-out act of revenge—you knew perfectly well that women were taboo in the bar."

Carefully she set down her glass. "I knew nothing of the sort, but even if I had known it would have made no difference, I would still have ignored the ridiculous custom.^ Aren't you freebooters aware that a law has been passed forbidding sex discrimination in this country? Has it not yet reached your isolated ears that women are no longer barred from any of the professions, much less from squalid male-dominated bars? I shall go wherever I please," she tilted, "and if I'm questioned I shall counter any objections by asserting that a wife's place is by her husband's side! I will *not* be left abandoned at Fox Hall while you disappear each day about your pleasures. I want to come with you—I *will* come with you—and if you try to stop me I'll follow you, and when I find you I'll greet you in exactly the same way I did today. I'm not ashamed of showing affection, indeed, I enjoy it, and so might your friends if someone shows them the way."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me!"

She meant every word and he knew it. Although she suspected that northerners could be a warm and passionate race they possessed more than their share of English reserve. The drastic action she had outlined would be abhorrent to Adam.

"That's blackmail!" He glowered down at her from his superior height, obviously itching to put his clenched hands around her tantalizing neck. "Yet another of the Maxwell traits rearing its ugly head!"

Pertly she countered, "I would have thought such a course of action would flatter your masculine ego, but call it what you will, the

outcome will still be the same, wherever *you* go, *I* go—like an extra rib! In time you might even be tempted to follow your namesake's example by exchanging your rib for a wife."

"And regret it for the rest of my miserable life, as he did?" Adam clamped, looking wildly tempted to administer another spanking. Tammy edged away with a nervous laugh. "I'm ready to go home now. I believe I heard a car outside, perhaps someone would be kind enough to give us a lift?"

He swung on his heel, resentment in every line of his tall frame. "I'm in no need of a lift, my business here is not yet finished."

"But how am I to get back?" she cried, reminded of her blistered heel and the exhausted puppy's dead weight.

His reply was a satisfied snarl. "Get back the way you came, on foot. I just wish that by some magical process the road could be stretched to three times its length for the return journey!"

"Arrogant, unfeeling brute!" she stormed back, "what about Silver, would you have him walk until his pads bleed?" The puppy's ears pricked at the sound of his name, his big eyes, still baby-blue, reflecting pathos as they fastened upon Adam's face.

Although impervious to her discomfort, Adam could not abandon the puppy to the same fate. He picked him up and popped him inside his jacket.

"Only a thoughtless individual such as yourself would subject a nine-week-old dog to such a trek! I'll take him back with me."

As he swung on his heel Tammy stared after him. He could not mean to abandon her! The road back to Fox Hall stretched all of five miles and the blister was now burning a fiery hole in her heel.

"Adam, wait...!" She ran outside to plead with him, biting her lip as pain jabbed red-hot through her foot. His rangy stride faltered, but not on her account. A car had pulled off the road and stopped beside him. As Tammy limped painfully forward the girl driver wound down the window and poked out her head.

"Adam darling, I'd no idea you were back! Why didn't you phone?"

Tammy halted, pain forgotten as she strained to hear his reply. *Darling*, the girl had called him. Her hackles rose, resenting the implied intimacy.

Adam's frown gave way to a smile. "Hello, Pam, I meant to phone you, but I haven't had time. I arrived home only yesterday and there's been so much neglected while I was away."

"I understand." The girl's forgiving smile made Tammy simmer. "Bnt you will come over to supper tonight, promise me... ?"

As he hesitated the girl stepped out of the car. She was tall, almost as tall as Adam, with firm, well-rounded curves, slender waist, and long, slender legs tapering into fine ankles. As Tammy hobbled forward Aunt Vinnie's words echoed in her ears. "*Dozens of strong, healthy Dales lassies would have been glad to become Adam's wife*". No doubt this girl was one of them! She had a hungry, possessive look when she looked at Adam and her fingers were stroking his coat sleeve with tender concern. She reached them just in time to hear Adam's reluctant refusal.

"I'm sorry, Pam, but I'm afraid that won't be possible. Some other time, perhaps..."

Tammy jumped in with both feet. "But of course it's possible, Adam, my love! I'm simply dying to meet your friends and no doubt all of them will be eager to meet your wife."

A bomb of silence exploded. The blonde, Junoesque figure seemed turned to stone, her green eyes registering shock as they raked Tammy's face, questioning her right to intrude upon a world which up until that moment had contained only Adam and herself. Tammy felt waves of resentment being directed towards her. She shivered and moved closer to Adam's side, only to be repulsed by a stare of cold dislike.

Feeling like a pygmy between giants, she waited, slight, defenceless, unwanted, yet determined to stand up for her rights.

The girl made a magnificent recovery, though her voice was still breathless with shock as she ventured a laugh. "Your *wife*, Adam...?"

"I'm afraid so." The wryness of his tone set Tammy's teeth on edge. "Let me introduce you. Tammy, this is Pam Harden, a very close friend. Pam, meet Tammy... my wife."

As a sop to convention they shook hands, a light brushing of the fingertips more in keeping with the salutation exchanged between boxers before a fight. Green eyes sparkled with—Tammy shrewdly guessed—tears not far away, but Pam's voice was bright, even a little shrill. "But of course, we must arrange a gathering of all your friends. As your wife so rightly remarked, Adam, they'll be anxious to meet the new bride. I'll contact as many of them as I can and invite them to my house- this evening. Shall we say about eight. . . ?"

"Thank you, that will do nicely," Tammy answered for them both.

"Good, then meanwhile can I offer either of you a lift, as storm clouds seem to be gathering?"

They certainly were—on Adam's brow as his glowering eyes rested upon Tammy.

Bravely ignoring his displeasure, she accepted, "That's very good of you. Adam still has work to do, but I would welcome a lift back to Fox Hall."

He seemed torn between duty and his reluctance to leave Tammy alone with Pam for even the short time it would take to reach Fox Hall. He glanced at his watch and frowned.

"As we're dining with you this evening I'd better knock off now, business will have to wait."

Fifteen minutes later Pam deposited them both on the steps of Fox Hall, refusing an invitation to go inside on the grounds that she had a lot of arranging to do for the supper party that evening. With cheeks pale as cream and a fixed smile upon her lips she drove back down the drive.

Tammy breathed in deeply before carrying the war into enemy camp. "Pam is very beautiful. You two seem very close...?"

Adam did not ignore the question mark left hanging behind her words. "She is, and we are," he bit out savagely. "And to save you the effort of prying further I might as well satisfy your curiosity now by telling you that Pam is the girl I had seriously considered making my wife!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

As she dressed for the evening engagement Tammy refused to allow herself to become depressed. Any proposal of marriage that merited 'serious consideration' was not worth a light. Obviously Adam had had a narrow escape, although in his present state of mind he would never admit to it. Because he was feeling trapped by a marriage not of his own choosing the girl upon whom his fancy had dallied had assumed virtues that did not exist. All men desired most that which they could not have. Pam's cool and now distant beauty was a tantalizing mirage on his horizon, while she, eager, willing and close at hand, was handicapped by being always so readily available.

As she slithered into a dress of hand-printed silk chiffon, so costly even Jock had winced, she took herself to task.

"Play it cool, Tammy girl! Your man of the mountains likes to do his own hunting, he's excited by the chase, lured on by the elusive, and contemptuous of quarry that runs to lick his hand. If he has no taste for sugar try him with a little ginger!"

She floated downstairs, her creamy shoulders rising out of a flimsy cloud of blue, green and mauve. A slim silver belt encircled her waist, evidencing that the graceful form inside the cloud was not as ethereal as it seemed. Silver slippers peeped from beneath a hem frothing and whispering around delicate ankles. An intoxicating wave of perfume gave advance warning of her presence as she drifted towards Adam, who was waiting in the hall, his darkly brooding eyes fastened- upon the family crest.

Above a crescent of stars was inscribed in Latin: *Reparabit Cornw Phoebe*. Tammy stood on tip-toe to read aloud across his shoulder, stumbling over the pronunciation.

"What does it mean, Adam?"

"We'll have moonlight again," he translated. "A reiver promise to return whenever the time is ripe to collect his dues."

"Oh," she whispered, suddenly reminded of the previous night when in her moonlight-flooded bedroom she had offered a reiver his dues and had them rejected. Would he ever live up to the promise contained in his family motto ? For her, would there ever be moonlight again?

She shivered when a draught swirled around her ankles and held out her wrap, hoping his hands might linger as he laid it across her shoulders, that the potent perfume she had chosen might stir his senses, that the vibrant awareness she was feeling might be communicated to him and elicit some response. But his touch was impersonal as he helped her into the wrap, his voice coolly detached when he instructed,

"If you're quite ready we might as well go."

Pam must have spent hours on the telephone, judging from the number of people waiting to meet them when they entered the main room of a house, smaller than Fox Hall, yet in its way equally baronial. The room was lined with ancestral portraits of long-dead Hardens, their outstanding features repeated time and time again in the faces of those gathered together to pay their respects to Adam and to greet his new bride.

Tammy's first shock came when Pam took her by the hand and led her to the nearest group of people. Formally, she began the introduction.

"Lady Fox, may I present to you my aunt, Mrs Ann Harden and her husband, my uncle Toby?"

In a dream state Tammy acknowledged the smiles and good wishes, exchanged pleasantries, trying all the time to gather her scattered wits

and to come to terms with the title that had been so ignominiously thrust upon her. *Lady Fox!* Why had not Adam told her?

He had disappeared into the crowd, leaving Pam to make the introductions which she carried out with such dignified aplomb Tammy could not suppress unwilling admiration. Finally, however, the duty concluded, Pam collected two plates of food from a piled-up buffet, drew her into a quiet corner and allowed her mask to slip.

"How long did you and Adam know one another before your marriage?" she asked outright.

"Long enough," Tammy replied tartly, immediately on the defensive.

"Yet not long enough to discover that you were marrying a baron? Oh, yes, my dear, I felt your sudden start when I introduced you as Lady Fox. Admit it, you had no idea until then that Adam held such a title."

Tammy squirmed. Pam would not be easy to deceive.

"Telling me must have slipped his mind," she countered. "Like me, he probably considers such things irrelevant to modern society."

Softly, Pam laughed. "But our world hasn't changed for centuries. I grant you that on the surface we may seem pretty up-to-date, but basically we're a feudal community which accords to Adam the same respect and deference it did the first Baron Fox, a warden of the English West March, to whom every family in this region pledged its loyalty. Adam has inherited his qualities of leadership, his flair for command and, when necessity demands it, his utter ruthlessness. But then I hardly need tell you that," her laughter held the brittle coolness of ice, "unless, of course, your marriage to Baron Fox is, as I suspect, no more substantial than Reynard's globe of glass." She raised her eyes in pretended surprise at Tammy's look of puzzlement. "You

must be conversant with Aesop's fable? Reynard the fox was purported to have sent an invaluable treasure as a present to his queen. But it never arrived, inasmuch as it had no existence outside of the imagination of the cunning fox. It was supposed to reveal what was being done, no matter how far off, and also to afford information on any subject that the person consulted wanted to know. Your marriage can be compared with Master Reynard's globe of glass—plenty of promise but no performance . . ." With a mocking salute Pam drifted away, leaving Tammy stabbing wildly with her fork at a plate of food being slowly seasoned with the salt of humiliated tears.

Then fierce Maxwell pride came to her rescue, drying the remaining tears before they could fall. If Meg Maxwell had admitted defeat she would never have borne her aloof husband three daughters and seven sons!

She looked around for Adam and saw his head towering above the rest. With chin elevated and eyes sparkling, she weaved her way through the Harden clan until she was by his side. He looked down and frowned, recognizing danger signals flying high in her cheeks. Her heart rejoiced. Marriage was not just a mating of the physical but a mating of the minds and, like it or not, Adam was becoming acutely perceptive to her moods.

Swiftly he reached out and captured her hand in his; the watching audience was not to know that the move was a defensive one brought about by the memory of her threat to flout her affection whenever she felt she was being ignored.

"Are you enjoying yourself, darling?" The term of affection almost choked him.

"I am now," she whispered tenderly, and felt wickedly rewarded when his colour rose.

As his male companions shuffled their feet and exchanged embarrassed glances music began to play, and couples began drifting towards the hall where the floor had been cleared of rugs to provide space for dancing. With a driven look that hid his desire to shake her by the shoulders until she begged for mercy, Adam grabbed Tammy's elbow and began propelling her out of the room. *"Let's dance."*

It was a bitter-sweet sensation, drifting in his arms to the strains of a romantic waltz. She closed her eyes, trying to imagine the bliss of being held by a lover, but the words being muttered in her ear were distinctly unromantic.

"Look here, Tammy," he sounded grimly desperate, "you must learn to act with more decorum, especially when in company. I know you're used to a society in which anything goes, and I suspect that you're enjoying a huge joke at my expense, but it must stop. Northerners are embarrassed by blatant displays of affection and I will not submit any longer to being made the object of your somewhat peculiar sense of humour. So please cut it out, remember your position, and act more as a —"

"As a lady?" she cut in sweetly. "But you see I had no idea until this evening that I was a lady. Why didn't you tell me?"

He looked taken aback but not guilty. Her heart warmed towards him; obviously the oversight had not been deliberate.

"I'm sorry," he apologised. "I ought to have mentioned it, but in actual fact I don't consider the matter important. A title is of very little use to a fell farmer. My sheep," his sudden grin caused her heart to somersault, "are not class-conscious, they care very little whether I wear a coronet or a cloth cap!"

She began to giggle and the iron band around her waist relaxed and seemed suddenly gentler as they danced around the floor, laughing

together, enjoying the shared humour. The magical thread entwining them seemed to strengthen as dance followed dance and he made no attempt to release her. It could have been that he was playing up to onlookers when he held her close, rested his cheek lightly upon her hair, and gave her sweet, unexpected smiles that toned her knees to water. Perhaps he was practising reiver strategy, a clever ploy to keep her wilful impulses at bay, but even if he were she did not care. She had his complete attention, which was all she wanted. They were circling the edge of the dance floor when Pam, her eyes cat-bright, stepped in their path.

"Adam, you're monopolising your wife disgracefully! Dirk Beattie—a late arrival—is simply itching to meet her."

With an alacrity that was dampening, Adam turned to greet the young man by Pam's side. "Sorry." He held out his hand. "Hello, Dirk, how are you? Tammy, I'd like you to meet Dirk Beattie, a distant cousin of Pam's. You two should have lots in common," his tone went dry. "Besides sharing your Scottish ancestry, Dirk spends most of his leisure time living it up with the London jet set."

When Tammy's resentful stare fell upon him Dirk winced, but recovered with a smoothness that declared him a sophisticate. Gallantly, he bowed over her outstretched hand, his dancing, appreciative eyes fastened upon her face.

"Adam." Pam plucked at his sleeve. "Colonel Jefferson was looking for you earlier, there's something of importance he wants to discuss."

As Tammy's baleful gaze pierced their retreating backs, Dirk teased, "You look to me as if you would like to revive the custom peculiar to the Sura tribe of Bauchi, my dear, when the proper thing is for the chief to eat any woman convicted of adultery."

She rounded on him, ready to attack his ego with withering scorn, but the twinkle in his eye was too infectious and reluctantly she had to laugh.

"Are my feelings for the man so obvious?" she quirked ruefully.

"Only to someone as keenly perceptive as myself,"

he preened with barefaced conceit. "But I must admit that your tactics, or rather lack of them, surprises me. Knowing your background, I should have thought you conversant with the fact that these wild northerners are predatory beasts who need the stimulation of the chase before they can appreciate the kill."

She weighed up the debonair young man with the laughing eyes and humorous mouth and decided she liked him. "I know," she muttered the admission, "but I daren't begin to rim in case he should decide not to follow."

"Ah...!" Her candour was rewarded with a smile of sympathy. "Then allow me to offer myself as bait to tempt the wily fox. I'll wager he'll quickly enough catch the scent of competition."

The offer was idly presented, to be taken seriously or as a jest. Mindful of Adam's fierce pride, Tammy hesitated, but then, feeling safe in the knowledge that Dirk played the game to the same rules as herself and was an expert in the art of dallying lightly without wishing any involvement, she accepted on a reckless breath.

"Very well, let's see if a flirtatious fuse can set the rocket alight!"

No guidelines needed to be set; they were both too well practised in the art of flirtation. Before long covert glances were being levelled from all sides, scandalized eyes following their progress as hand in hand they sauntered around, looking deeply into each other's eyes,

clinging together when they danced, huddling close whenever they sat engrossed in conversation which Dirk found amusing but which brought confused blushes to Tammy's cheeks.

"Keep it up, we're doing fine!" he mocked, remembering to bestow a tender smile as he traced the curve of her eyebrow with an exploratory finger.

"It was that last dance that did it," she smiled back, projecting an air of shy confusion. "You held me a little too close for a while too long. I swear they would hear the outraged gasps in the next room."

"In that case, it shouldn't be long before Adam makes an appearance," he grinned. "Ah, what perfect timing," his head lifted, "here he comes!"

Tammy tensed. Lord Fox would not be pleased to bear his wife's name being bandied from lip to lip. But however upset he might be it would be worth it, she decided, quivering inwardly, if the outcome should bring about the end of his appalling neglect.

Though she was sitting facing the wall she sensed Adam advancing towards them and jumped up in a flurry of fright. "Let's walk in the garden," she begged, fixing pleading eyes on Dirk's face.

A french window was standing slightly open, allowing in a cool draught for the benefit of the dancers. With commendable aplomb, Dirk pretended not to notice Adam and rose to his feet to escort her outside. Nervously she took his proffered arm and allowed him to lead her on to a balcony with steps leading down into the night-shrouded garden.

It was a mistake, she realised, immediately the chill night air stroked icy fingers across her uncovered shoulders. She shivered, not so much with cold as with trepidation.

Adam's voice speared into their conversation.

"Perhaps, Beattie, you would be good enough to fetch my wife a wrap?" It was a command, crisp, incisive, which the younger man was quick to obey.

Tammy spun round, ready to argue that she was ready to go back inside, but the words were smothered by a gasp when a coat was flung around her shoulders. Warm silk lining stroked a caress against her skin and the faint tang of a recently smoked cheroot still clung to his jacket. She hugged the coat around her, feeling snug and protected, but faltered a protest to the white-shirted figure towering over her.

"Adam, you'll catch cold, let's go back inside! It was a silly idea of mine to come out here, I hadn't realized the night air would be so cold."

The extent of his displeasure could be gauged by the depth of ice in his voice. "So I was right, you did discover you had a lot in common with our playboy explorer."

She noted his grim mouth, frowning expression, belligerent stance, and shrank from the tall figure bent forward, ready to pounce upon every nuance and shade of expression betrayed on her face. So must the first Baron Fox have interrogated his captured outlaws!

She faltered a laugh. "Is Dirk an explorer? I didn't know, we didn't get around to discussing his work."

Watchfully, he enquired, "No doubt you found more rewarding subjects of conversation?"

She snuggled deeper into his coat, clinging to its flimsy armour as protection against the devil aroused but not yet rampant.

"He did mention an interest in African tribal customs. Do you suppose that's why he's here," she ventured, all innocent sweetness, "to study the reactions of primitive man?"

An expletive ripped from his lips. "Don't try me too far, Tammy, unless you want to experience for a second time the somewhat uncivilized chastisement we savages bestow upon our errant wives!"

She backed away. "Don't you dare touch me.. .1"

With one stride he bridged the gap between them. "Don't *you* dare provoke me! Perhaps, though, you enjoyed your first spanking so much you're actually inviting more... ?"

Dirk chose that moment to appear with her wrap. Outwardly nonchalant, but keeping a wary eye on Adam's movements, he held it out to her.

"Here you are, sweetie! Pity, in a way, to discard the coat—a woman always seems to me to be most delectably feminine when wearing masculine togs several sizes too large. What say you, Adam?"

"I say it's time for us to leave." He shrugged into the coat Tammy handed him, then took hold of her elbow, showing unconscious possession as he guided her indoors. She was given no time to thank Dirk nor even to wave goodbye, but as she was being whisked passed him she caught sight of an impudent wink and a grin that said: "Success, partner! The fox has the scent—the chase has begun!"

CHAPTER NINE

TAMMY looked up, her attention caught by the rat-tat of hail upon the windowpanes. Outside it was dark, damp and grey, the fells no more than a blurred outline barely visible through a sheet of driving rain. She settled down to her task, feeling contented and at ease in the comfort of her bedroom. Domesticity was a novel pleasure; although eager to please Adam, she had never imagined herself becoming absorbed to such an extent in simple tasks.

On the table by her side lay a colourful pile of embroidery silks and spread out upon her knee a cloth upon which she had traced a pattern of flowers, leaves and exotic-looking birds. Aunt Honor had given her the idea. The morning after the supper party at Pam's she had enquired whether or not the evening had been a success and Tammy's answer had brought from her a nod of sympathy.

"I suppose so," Tammy had shrugged. "I did meet one man with a sympathetic outlook, but I'm afraid I didn't go down so well with the ladies present; their conversation revolved around some Show or other and the exhibits they mean to enter. I was asked if I intended entering for any of the competitions, but when I told them I couldn't bake, had no idea how to make jam and that the bottling of fruit was a complete mystery to me their superior expressions made me wild."

Aunt Honor had clucked, "Yes, I know what you must have felt, my dear, they can be very trying. Still, they must have been very relieved to hear that there was no danger of your continuing old traditions. You see," she sounded almost apologetic, "for years Vinnie and I have carried off most of the prizes at the County Show. Vinnie's jams and bottled fruits are superb and I've had an unprecedented run of luck in the bakery section. This year, however, we both decided we had no time to spare for the painstaking trial-and-error routine one has to pursue in order to come up with a winning entry. A pity," she

sighed, "for the past fifty years entries from Fox Hall have led the field."

For some reason Tammy had felt ashamed. "I wish I could help, Aunt Honor, but any efforts of mine would win no more than a wooden spoon."

"Never mind, my dear, I understand how you feel, for although Vinnie and I have done well in our own particular sections we've never yet managed to gain so much as a commendation in the painting and needlework sections, no matter how hard we've tried."

"I'm quite good at both those things," Tammy had surprised her.

Aunt Honor had looked doubtful. "I'm sure you are, my dear, but..."

"But what?" Tammy had urged, quelling a surge of optimism.

"Well, I don't want to dampen your enthusiasm, nor do I doubt your ability, but we do have some surprisingly gifted people in our vicinity; the quality of their work is superb. Pam's aunt, for instance, has for years walked off with first prize in the embroidery section, while Pam herself is an exceptionally gifted artist who, if she wished, could easily earn her living by painting." Aunt Honor shook her head. "No, Tammy, for your ego's sake I wouldn't advise entering into contest with either of those two."

She could not have chosen words more likely to arouse Tammy's competitive instincts. It was akin to warning a Scot against entering an arena where the English reigned supreme!

"Just tell me where I can get the materials I need, then leave the rest to me," Tammy had crisped.

Aunt Honor had sighed, then with a flicker of sympathy had told her, "You'll find everything you need in the way of painting upstairs in the lumber room—easel, oils, canvases, the lot. And my workbasket is crammed with embroidery silks."

Thoughtfully, Tammy matched peacock blue with green, her favourite colour combination, for the tail feathers of a bird barely outlined, as yet, upon cream- coloured cloth. She murmured to herself as with head bent she added further delicate stitches,

"We'll show 'em, Tammy girl! For once Daddy is- going to see some return for the fantastic fees he paid out on your education." She chuckled, remembering how resentful she had been of Madame Picaurd, her French needlework teacher, who had devoted hours of her time to one she had considered exceptionally gifted.

"You have an eye for colour, *cherie*, and an almost professional skill in designing. Keep it up, one day you will be grateful for such talents." Tammy had kept it up only because her creative urge had been satisfied by the taking of a piece of cloth and transforming it into a thing of beauty. Art, too, had served the same purpose. To her, an empty canvas had represented a challenge— the finished picture as much a part of her as a newly- born child.

Cocking her head to one side, she examined her work, smiling satisfaction at the pattern slowly but surely evolving. Her sense of achievement was great enough to make her wonder why she had ever allowed the pastime to lapse. But since leaving school there had been none of the silent, solitary moments necessary to carry out this type of work. Life had been crammed full of trivia, energy expended on worthless pursuits with an end product of precisely nothing.

Carefully she folded away her work, deciding she had progressed far enough for one day. The show was still three months away, but her absorption was such that every spare moment had been spent in her

bedroom or else wandering the fells in search of a spot she might immortalize on canvas. As yet, she had not found it, but perhaps today she would. She stretched and peered out of the window at the weakly-glimmering sunshine, deciding to go out and search. She threw on a mac, tied a headsquare under her chin, then left her bedroom to trip lightly down the stairs and across the hall.

Adam passed her in the land rover when she was halfway down the drive. She waved absently and hurried on, unprepared for the squeal of brakes and for the crunch of pursuing strides that caught her up before she reached the huge main gates decorated with coronets of twisted black iron and foxes with elongated brushes that reached upwards towards a row of sharp spikes. Once, those spikes would have deterred even the boldest of Scots from trespassing upon Fox territory, but these days they stood wide open, positioned so permanently they now acted as a trellis for encroaching weeds.

Intent upon her purpose, Tammy was unaware of being followed and reacted with a gasp of surprise when a heavy hand descended upon her shoulder to spin her quickly around.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry, might I ask? The same place to which you've consistently been disappearing for the past few days?"

Her brow wrinkled. Adam sounded so angry, so unlike her previously-uninterested husband!

"I'm going for a walk." Surprise laced her tone with sarcasm. "That is, if you don't mind."

"I might, depending upon which companion you choose."

"Which companion ..-." Her eyebrows shot up.

"You've been conspicuous by your absence lately, don't pretend you haven't been seeing a lot of Beattie!" he ground.

A flash of insight warned her to choose her words carefully; obviously she had been missed if only for her nuisance value—she must exploit the situation to the full.

"I've been kept occupied these past few days," she murmured, her flush of triumph akin to a blush of shame, "but on this occasion I intend taking a walk by myself. I have it in mind to begin a painting," she confided eagerly. "All the paraphernalia I need is in the house, but I'm looking for a particularly spectacular view, something to capture both the eye and the imagination."

"I know of such a place," he admitted slowly, eyeing her suspiciously, "but as it's way off the beaten track I would have to take you."

Rain had plastered scrolls of hair on to his forehead, the dense black mass sprinkled with captured raindrops. As Tammy watched two of them escaped to run down his high-bridged nose. He shook them off, showing impatience as he waited for her reply.

"Would you really take me, Adam ...?"

Without replying, he strode back to the land rover, started up the engine, and executed a wide arc to draw up by her side. "Jump in!" he commanded, uncompromisingly terse.

Never one to question her good fortune, she steadied her quivering nerves and clambered up beside him.

He directed the bonnet of the car southward and drove through innumerable small villages, along narrow winding roads awash with the downpour that had begun early that morning and continued well

into the afternoon. The road began to climb, then they rounded a sharp corner where, through sparsely foliated hedgerows, Tammy caught a glimpse far below of a lake collared by mighty fells, their wooded slopes gentler in outline than the crags guarding Fox Hall. She expected Adam to make for the edge of the lake, but instead he swung left into a car park, deserted except for themselves.

"During the summer this place is like an anthill, crawling with people, but at this time of year uncertain weather keeps them away."

She looked around for the view he had promised and was disappointed. The lake itself, though beautiful, looked far from spectacular wearing a bleak grey veil.

He read her thoughts. "Bide your time," he chided, swinging his long legs out of the land rover, "and be prepared to walk."

They passed through a small swing gate, followed a path leading into a wood where a spread of fir cones crunched beneath their feet, then began trudging through dark stretches of closely massed conifers relieved only occasionally by light green islands of larch. Standing shoulder to shoulder, their tops flung skyward, the trees reminded Tammy of rows of stiffly-held guardsmen positioned with almost geometric precision. A red squirrel perched on a branch, an acorn between its paws, jerked to attention, then scampered madly to the top branches as they passed.

After a while Tammy heard a muffled roar. She edged nearer to Adam when, with each step they took, the roaring grew more sinisterly loud. He checked her footsteps, indicating the edge of the path where steps had been hewn roughly out of the earth sloping downwards. She followed him, carefully watching where she placed her feet, then looked quickly upward when, like a curtain torn aside, grey mist parted to reveal a cataract of gleaming, rushing, slapping, curling, thumping water.

Speechless with awe, she drank in the inspiring sight. The gorge into which the water was teeming seemed alive with thunder and clouds of rising spray forming from thousands of tons of water crashing angrily upon granite rocks. A rustic bridge spanned the narrow gorge and as Adam drew her into the centre she hung on to a fragile handrail and looked down, feeling a sensation akin to shooting the rapids. The bridge creaked under their weight, but Adam looked so confidently calm she suppressed her alarm.

Spray fell in a mist around her, dewing her skin and adding a tempting moistness to her parted lips.

"When you've seen the biggest waterfalls in the Scottish Highlands or those in the Alps our modest falls are often a disappointment!" he yelled above the thundering water. "Hundreds of people come here in summertime when the fall is a mere trickle, but it's on days such as today that they give their best performance for the discerning few."

With so much spray about it was not surprising that they missed the first scattered drops of rain. Then suddenly the grey sky seemed to empty itself upon the engrossed couple dallying on the bridge, showing such foolish indifference to the lowering skies. With fiendish glee the deluge descended and in the space of seconds they were soaked to the skin.

Adam grabbed Tammy's hand and began to run, then when they reached the bank he shoved her, gasping and spluttering, beneath a sheltering tree. She looked as if she had run fully clothed through the waterfall. Every stitch she wore was sodden, water was streaming from her hair, tangling her eyelashes, and running in rivulets down her cheeks. She gasped, blinked drops from her lashes, then as she stared into his concerned face suddenly began to laugh.

After an uncertain second he joined in. He had steeled himself for rebuke, even a tirade of abuse, so there was relief in his laughter and a

certain amount of admiration for the carefully reared plant transplanted without ceremony into tough, unfamiliar terrain.

Bundling her collar closer around her neck, he confided roughly, "Few women of my acquaintance would appreciate the guilty pleasure to be obtained from getting wet to the skin. It's a pleasure similar to that of robbing orchards or smashing plates. Do you remember, when you were very young, walking in puddles with your shoes on simply because you'd been told not to?"

Tammy nodded, her eyes sparkling. "The first few seconds were horrible, but once you were wet through the misery was behind you and only then did you begin to enjoy total saturation. Now that we're in that glorious state, why don't we just splash our way back to the car? It isn't as if we could get any wetter ..."

They ran, hand in hand like children through the storm, lifting up their faces to the deluge, drinking in raindrops as intoxicating as champagne, daring the elements to do their worst and then revelling when their challenge was met by even more ferocious rain.

When they reached the land rover they collapsed inside, a sodden heap of merriment. With his hands placed on the wheel, Adam hesitated just long enough to plant a swift kiss upon Tammy's upturned nose. "For being such a sport!" he explained when laughter died and her large eyes questioned.

She could not have felt prouder had she received a medal.

"Thank you . . ." she whispered, feeling an intense urge to cry.

Quickly he switched on, revved up the engine and began speeding them on their way.

Tammy awoke around midnight shivering with cold but with a feverishly hot forehead and a dry aching throat. Four hours previously the two horrified aunts had hustled her upstairs into a hot bath, then straight into bed, where they had stood over her until a glass of hot milk laced with brandy had been drained. She had protested vigorously, but to no avail. Aunt Honor had scolded Adam roundly when, upon their arrival at Fox Hall, he had half carried his bedraggled, soaking wet companion across the threshold. Even Aunt Vinnie, once the despised milk had been drunk and Tammy was settled against her pillows, had muttered a brief indictment of her nephew.

"I can't imagine what he was thinking of—he must have taken leave of his wits!"

When a shudder ran through her body Tammy struggled upright, groping for the dressing gown that was usually draped across the foot of her bed. She felt bewilderingly weak and an agonising pain stabbed her throat whenever she swallowed. Unsteadily, she swung her legs from the bed, registering in a light-headed way that the fire dying in the grate was making little or no impression upon the chilly bedroom.

She stumbled across to the connecting door in search of Adam. The sensation of floating on air was unpleasant, the hot and cold waves of weakness shooting through her body both puzzling and distressing.

"Adam . . .!" she called out. The ensuing croak amazed her. She swallowed painfully, then tried again, but the sound that issued from her parched lips was too faint to penetrate the heavy oak door. Sobbing weakly, she thumped it with her fist, then, completely drained of energy, she slid to the floor.

Mercifully, Adam, tousle-haired, his dressing gown thrown loosely across his shoulders, flung open the door and almost fell over the prostrate figure lying across the threshold.

"Good lord, Tammy . . .!" The savage exclamation penetrated her stupor seconds before strong arms clutched her warm and snug against a broad chest. She snuggled against him with a grateful murmur, burrowing her aching head into his shoulder. Gently she was carried across to her bed, but when he tried to withdraw she murmured dissent and hung on feverishly to his sleeve.

"Don't leave me, Adam . . ." The pitiful plea was barely audible. "I'm so c-cold."

"I must, but only for a second, just long enough to fetch the aunts." His reply seemed to come from miles away, yet clearly discernible was the thread of male desperation running through his words—the blind panic of a man of strength faced for the first time in his life with an inability to decide upon the best course of action.

As he hesitated her teeth began to chatter and an uncontrollable shudder racked her frame, terminating in a convulsive jerk as her fingers clenched tightly around the lapels of his dressing gown.

"Hold me, Adam... Hold me close...!"

Smothering a groan, he cradled her against his chest, rocking her like a child in his arms, muttering words of comfort against her damp brow. Still holding her close, he bent slowly forward until her back was resting against the pillows, then he began tucking the blankets around her, intent upon enclosing her in a tight cocoon. But when he tried to ease away she resisted, refusing to relax her grip upon his lapels.

With surprising tenderness he smoothed a wisp of hair from her damp brow. "I can't stay, Tammy, you must see that. I'll get the aunts to help you..."

"No, I want you!" He winced when the distressed words croaked painfully from her throat, then ran agitated fingers through his hair.

With matching hoarseness he pleaded, "I'm not made of iron, Tammy!" But she was too ill to think, all she could do was feel—feel the pulsating warmth of his body frustratingly close yet not close enough, and the heavenly comfort of his arms. All this she fought to retain, not wanting to exist without his breath cool upon her cheeks, his nearness that was a protection against the tremors that every now and then were chilling her spine.

In weakness she succeeded where in strength she had failed.

With jaw tightly clenched, indicating impulses firmly curbed, Adam slid his lean body between the sheets and gathered her feverish body into his arms, soothing her into slumber with low, compassionate murmurs that betrayed none of the leaping blue flame contained within eyes which, during the whole night of prolonged torture, while in her delirious state she sought comfort and warmth from his close proximity, feathering kisses upon his chin and breathing incoherent words of love into his ear, concentrated rigidly upon a framed sampler hung on the wall immediately opposite the bed. Its message was apt and succinct:

God created man and, finding him not sufficiently alone, gave him a companion to make him feel his solitude more keenly!

CHAPTER TEN

DIRK came to see her as soon as the aunts deemed Tammy was well enough to receive visitors. He was not her first visitor; Pam had arrived the day before to gloat, Tammy thought rather uncharitably, over her blighted adversary.

It had taken her over a week to recover from her bout of influenza, then a second week to overcome the side effects, a depressive weakness that showed itself in tears that spurted too easily, doleful eyes, and fits of trembling that left her body weak and perspiration beading her brow. These symptoms were most apparent whenever Adam made one of his brief appearances. He would frown, sensing that his presence in some way disturbed her, and after a swift, taciturn enquiry after her health would make his departure, his quizzical eyes questioning her reluctance to be left alone in his company.

She wanted to explain the paralysing bouts of shyness that were the cause of her distant attitude. She had practically no recollection of the beginning of her illness, only an instinctive knowledge that he had been with her and an inner conviction that she had in some way embarrassed him. He had brushed her words aside when tentatively she had tried to question, but slow colour rising beneath his tan had proved her suspicion correct and from then on acute embarrassment had been their constant chaperone.

She had displeased him, of that she was certain. In the past he had demonstrated plainly his aversion to brazen advances, but then, in rude good health, she had been able to laugh off his displeasure. Why not now? What traumatic episode locked away in the back of her mind was causing an aspen trembling whenever less than a yard separated them? Why did she shrink with lashes downcast from steel-blue eyes that seemed to probe the very depths of her soul ?

Tammy Maxwell, a timid, shrinking violet! How her friends would laugh if they knew! How Meg, her spirited ancestress, would have fumed against her spineless timidity in the presence of a renegade Fox!

Dirk's appearance came as a relief. He breezed in full of confidence and immediately her spirits lifted.

"Sweets to the sweet!" he grinned, throwing a bag of toffees into her lap. "The village shopkeeper almost lost her eyebrows when I asked for crystallised fruits, and 'boxes of chocolates'," he mimicked, " 'are ordered only for special occasions such as Christmas'."

Tammy's burst of laughter was like a dam released, beginning as a trickle dancing over pebbles, then building gradually into a spate she could not control as he minced around the room giving a passable imitation of the strait-laced spinster who ran the village shop.

"Please, stop!" she gasped, pressing a hand to her aching side. "You're as good as a tonic, but enough is enough, if I laugh any more I'll burst!"

Sobering suddenly, he crossed over to place a hand on each arm of her chair, stooping to examine her wan face.

"Solemn eyes," he murmured. "I thought when I walked in that you looked as if you'd forgotten how to laugh. What you need, my lovely, is a feast of merriment, something to help disperse the depression clouding those enormous brown orbs. Do you feel up to a shindig, a real knees-up, boisterous night out?"

"Yes, please," she sighed, "only I don't feel I could manage the journey."

"Journey . . . ?" His wiggling eyebrows almost sent her into hysterics.

"To London," she affirmed when she was able to command sufficient breath. "Isn't that where you mean us to go?"

"Believe it or not, they do occasionally let their hair down here in the backwoods. I have it on good authority that a 'Merry Neet' is in the offing. Usually they take place in autumn, a last fling before the rigours of winter, but for some reason into which I didn't delve, some of the local young bloods have decided to hold one this week before lambing gets into full swing."

Tammy perked visibly. "Sounds interesting. What *is* a Merry Neet, exactly?"

"A gathering of friends and neighbours whose sole object is to cram as much fun as possible into the time allowed. This Meet is just a one-night affair, but I've heard that some of them can last as long as a week. All we need is transport to the chosen rendezvous, casual clothing, and a capacity to consume liquor in fair quantity. Oh, yes, and you may also be asked to sing! What do you say, are you game?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"Right!" He planted a swift kiss on the tip of her nose. "Then be ready tomorrow evening, I'll call for you about eight."

When Dirk left she had time to sort out her thoughts and after careful consideration decided she would keep the treat a secret. The aunts would be sure to make a fuss, whereas Adam was not the least bit interested in her plans. Yet later, while sharing a cup of tea with Aunt Honor, she could not resist the temptation to probe.

"Have you ever attended a Merry Neet, Aunt Honor ? I've heard they can be quite amusing."

"Indeed I have," Aunt Honor chuckled, laying down her cup and settling back in her seat in an attitude Tammy had come to recognize as a prelude to reminiscences. "When I was a girl the Merry Neets used to go on without ceasing from Friday morning to the following Wednesday night. Every Meet started off with a fox hunt. On a crisp, misty morning the hunt would gather in their pink coats with an eager pack of hounds around their feet. Autumn colours clothed the trees and bracken and more often than not there was a nip of frost to keep us on our toes and a sprinkling of snow on the top fells. Some people used to follow the hunt on foot, scanning the fells with fieldglasses, and at the end of the day there was always a great fire roaring up the chimney of the inn where, once the hunt returned, the festivities would begin. For those who didn't follow the hunt there were hound trails, sheepdog trials and clay pigeon shooting. And, of course, the real business of the Meet was carried on all day at the back of the inn."

"And what was the real business of the Meet?"

"Why, to return any stray sheep that had been picked up on the fells during the year and turn them over to their rightful owners. Officially that's what a Meet is all about, the fanners from miles around gather up all their strays and drive them into pens behind the inn where an old shepherd spends all day sorting them out. Most of the older shepherds can recognise a sheep quicker than they can recognise a human being."

"You mean they can actually tell one sheep from another?" Tammy's eyes were incredulous. "But how?"

"By their earmarks mostly, my dear. Each farm inherits its own earmarks—it has been said that the practice descended from the Vikings who once invaded and settled in these hills because the terrain reminded them of home. If the ear is 'cropped' the end is chopped clean off, but if it's 'forked' or 'ritted' it's slit down the centre.

'Fork bitted' means a v-shaped notch is cut out of the side of the ear, while 'key bitted' is a square-cut notch. As each ear has a top side and a bottom side and each sheep two ears, the number of possible combinations is considerable. On top of all that, there are horn burns and marks on different parts of the body. But the older shepherds have no need to look for the 'pop' on the side or even the lug marks, they just take one look and say: 'Them'll be Tom Lowther's roughs' or 'Yon shearling's fra Glendinning', and they're always right.'""

Tammy's interest was so intense she forgot to be cautious. "How fascinating, I can't wait to see it all!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to, dearie, because the Merry Neets aren't held until autumn. Folks are far too busy at this time of year to be singing twenty or so verses of a hunting song at three o'clock in the morning."

"Oh, but . . ." Tammy faltered, "couldn't you be mistaken? I did hear recently that a Merry Neet was being planned for some time this week."

The old lady's lips pursed. "Some folks would like to have Christmas every month and a Merry Neet each week! No, you must be mistaken, although it *has* been known for some of the younger element to plan their own version of a Merry Neet they bear no comparison to the real thing."

Wisely, Tammy let the subject drop before the old lady became suspicious, but for the rest of the day worry nagged her, so much so that if it had been at all possible to send a message to Dirk telling him she had changed her mind she would gladly have done so.

She left Aunt Honor to go up to her room, feeling an inclination to continue with the needlework she had neglected for the past two weeks. She had just settled in a chair by the window when, after a mere apology of a knock, Adam strode in.

He looked windswept, his black hair tousled, his glance crisp as the frost on the high fells where he had spent his day. Though he was dressed casually in tweed jacket, riding breeches and with a silk scarf knotted beneath the open collar of his shirt, breeding sat like a cloak around straight held shoulders that carried with ease the proud head with profile etched stern.

"Baron Fox come to check up on his encumbrances," she muttered under her breath, grabbing at resentment in order to combat the sweet wave of weakness that was barely allowing her to breathe.

Stuffing the delicate embroidery behind a cushion, inshe rose to her feet, desperately nonplussed by his unexpected appearance.

"Do you want something?"

Black eyebrows winged upward with surprise. His frowning glance rested first upon her flushed cheeks, then upon the cushion she had used as a hiding place, his eyes narrow with suspicion.

"Have I chosen an inopportune moment for my visit ?" The silk-smooth reply was loaded with questions: Why the guilty blush? Why the defensive attitude? And what lies hidden behind the innocent-looking cushion? Casually, he began strolling towards it, but Tammy read his mind and quickly stepped forward to block his way, determined that the fabric woven with dreams should remain hidden until the time came to surprise him and his followers with evidence of her unsuspected skill.

"It's good of you to spare me any time at all," she laughed nervously, "when the busiest season of the year is almost upon you. Would you like some tea?" she continued in a rush. "Aunt Honor and I have just shared a pot, but I can easily make some more."

"No, thank you," he clipped, but then astounded her with the curt question, "Has Beattie been here?"

"Yes," she stammered, "he called in to cheer me up and to bring me a small present." Further explanation choked in her throat as his piercing glance swivelled once more in the direction of the cushion. She felt an hysterical desire to giggle. Obviously, he had decided that the present Dirk had brought was hidden away to be gloated over later in private. She made no attempt to disabuse him.

"Is there a reason for your visit... a particular reason, I mean ..?" She was stammering like a gauche, self-conscious schoolgirl.

Adam pinned her in his sights. "I came to see you because you're my wife and you've been ill—an illness brought about entirely by my own stupidity—do you find it so surprising that I should want to enquire daily about your state of health ? Any duty-conscious husband would do the same."

Duty-conscious! Yes, if nothing else, he was that, she thought bitterly. If he were not so duty-bound, so mindful of his obligations she would not at this moment be the reigning Baroness Fox! Yet she sensed amusement behind his words and the idea of his finding her an object of fun was galling.

"I'm perfectly well, thank you," her voice jabbed needle-sharp. "The state of my health need cause you no further delay." Pointedly she looked towards the door, but to her consternation Adam ignored the hint and eased his lean frame into a nearby chair.

"Come here," steely fingers fastened around her wrist, "let me look at you." Showing a possessiveness she found startling, he mesmerized her into sinking to her knees beside him, then he drew her forward, bending his head until their eyes were level. Through her trancelike state his touch registered—a hard thumb tracing the contour of her

cheek. She quivered when with melting tenderness he murmured huskily, "You make a charming armful, that delicious warm mouth was made for kissing ..." His dark head lowered, his breath was fanning hot against her cheek, his lips bearing a half smile of humour were a mere fraction away when revulsion jerked her to her feet, revulsion against the naked longing running rampant through her body, an emotion stronger even than the urge to give herself wantonly into the arms of the man whose character was a legacy from ancestors who had written their names with the sword and of restraint knew nothing. Those mountain men had suffered moods of dalliance, just as Adam was suffering one now. Virile, lusty, full of masculine thirst only a woman could slake, they had drunk deeply and to the dregs. But Tammy found she did not want to be taken—she wanted to be loved. Rather than have only one small part of Adam she would prefer to have nothing!

"Would you go now, please?" Her control stretched a tight barrier against tears.

He rose to his feet, stretching tall, his total lack of regret confirming the wisdom of her actions.

"If that's what you want," he agreed coolly, strolling across to the window to train his far-seeing dalesman's eyes upon the peak standing sentinel over his home. "The sleeping giant!" With a nod he indicated the great hunched shoulder of rock, a remote wilderness where ravens chose to live. "Today he's in a benign mood," he continued, "not easily upset, soothed by the first rays of spring sunshine after a long, cold winter. But the day will surely come when fierce heat will arouse him and violent storms will cause him to lash out with sharp, pitiless shale. I shouldn't like you to see him in such a mood," he reflected mildly. "The consequences could frighten even the most fearless rebel."

Only then did she realize that he was speaking of himself, warning her against prodding the sleeping giant into anger, implying that while today he might be feeling benevolently disposed, tomorrow, given aggravating circumstances, she might find him far less amiable.

Plainly, he indicated the direction of his thoughts with the cool enquiry, "Are you expecting Beattie to call again?"

Tammy expelled a long shuddering breath, aware that she was dicing with danger.

"No," she lied. "No definite arrangements were made."

Adam swung round to face her, his lips stretched into a tight parody of a smile. "Good." The word bestowed a pat of approval upon her downbent head. "I'm sure you find him an entertaining companion—you're both from the same environment, you hold the same values, are both contemptuous of the opinions of those you consider insular and narrow-minded. Yet I think you, at least, are becoming conscious that we have a position to maintain in this community. We're Lord and Lady Fox of Fox Hall, a position of privilege. Yet privilege brings obligations, and as you seem fond of Biblical quotes I'll leave you with one on which to ponder: 'Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required...'"

Tammy remained staring at the door long after it had closed behind his ramrod back. There was no mistaking the ultimatum thrown down in lightly tendered words run through with threat. *Toe the line—or else!* Once more the Baron of the Marches had laid down the law to a rebellious Maxwell.

Drawn by impulse, she made her way to the lumberroom where a few days previously, while foraging for painting materials, she had stumbled across a portrait shrouded in dust-sheets, turned face to the wall as if banished in disgrace. Something vaguely familiar about the

face depicted on canvas had bothered her and as she held it up to the light for a second look realization dawned.

She could have been looking at a portrait of herself!

Meg Maxwell had worn her hair longer, yet the colour and texture seemed identical to her own. The mouth was curved into a soft, secretive smile of a woman who had no regrets. The laughing eyes held no shadow of remorse or shame.

With a despairing sigh, Tammy pleaded for guidance. "What would you do if you were me, Meg? Defy your lord and master in the hope or arousing his interest, or be a meek, submissive slave to his commands?"

The painted expression did not change, nor did a reply issue from the immobile lips, yet mocking laughter rang in Tammy's ears and as a draught swept through the half open doorway leaving rustling papers in its wake she imagined she heard music, a faint, ghostly rendering of an old Border ballad forever on Aunt Honor's lips.

When Beauty wants a warder
When fight and foray start
We, bred upon the Border,
Have still the reiver's heart!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AT a quarter to eight the following evening Tammy crept out of the back entrance of Fox Hall and keeping well into the shadows of the bushes lining the drive made her cautious way towards the main gate.

In such a manner, the girls of yesteryear must have braved the wrath of their families in order to meet with a forbidden lover, she thought, contemptuous of her own cowardice, yet perversely conscious of acting in a reckless, foolhardy manner. The aunts had retired to the sitting-room and Adam was busy in his study catching up on the paperwork that was the bane of a fell farmer's life. Tammy had excused herself with the plea of a headache and left them to go up to her room where, once inside, she had changed rapidly into a scarlet sweater and black slacks which Dirk had assured her would be suitable apparel for the evening. But courage had failed her at the thought of the questions and remonstrations that would result from Dirk's arrival at the door, so she had opted for a soft-footed exit down the back stairs.

Car headlights loomed out of the darkness just as she reached the main road. Frantically she waved her arms to attract Dirk's attention. The squeal of brakes scraped across her taut nerves as, casting a fearful glance across her shoulder, she ran to open the passenger door and slid inside the car.

"Good lord, Tammy, what do you mean by jumping out at me like that? If it weren't for the fact that I'd already slowed down in order to negotiate the drive I might have run you over!" He broke off, anger giving way to concern as he noted her frightened expression. "I'm sorry. You, too, have had a scare. But why were you standing there in the middle of the road—couldn't you have waited for me at the house?"

She banged shut the door, deciding, not without a quirk of shame, to allow him to believe eagerness had motivated her sudden appearance.

"I've been ready ages," she lied breathlessly, "so I thought I'd walk down to meet you and save time."

To her relief he grinned and started up the engine. "Eager little beaver, aren't you! Yet it's hardly surprising, you having lived in London this fellside existence must strike you as pretty appalling. What are these self-sufficient people who despise society—are they beasts or gods?"

Much to her own surprise Tammy resented the sneering criticism. "These people, unlike extroverts such as ourselves, neither apologise nor make excuses for the fact that they prefer their own company."

He took his eyes off the road long enough to cast her a puzzled look, then dryly observed, "It could also have something to do with the fact that they who choose to live in solitude can choose their own laws."

"They're the descendants of reivers," she defended simply.

"As are we," he shot back, annoyance furrowing his brow. "Don't follow the example of many of our fellow Scots by developing an inferiority complex so far as our feudal English neighbours are concerned. We Scots are remarkable if only for the fact that, in spite of being physically attached to England, we've survived as a nation, with our own culture, our own laws and institutions. For centuries we've fought against being swallowed up by the English—remember that, Tammy, whenever you feel in danger of allowing Adam's arrogance to swamp your spirit."

It was the tilt needed to jerk her out of the abyss of despondency into which she had sunk. Her chin jutted and a sparkle was visible in her

eyes when forcibly she reminded him, "Adam wouldn't approve of this outing, yet I am here, aren't I?"

They drove about an hour, climbing gradually at first, then so steeply that the engine began to labour as they crept slowly upwards. Moonlight was casting long cool fingers of gold across the peaks, poking between hunched shoulders of rock and patches of scrub. Lunar-bright water gushed between dark gullies sliced through granite, flowed beneath bridges, disappeared, then reappeared, dancing its way down to the mirror- smooth lake far below.

As the car gave a final desperate heave over a hump of road the ground flattened out in front of a building perched like an eyrie, a low, rambling inn, centuries old, with lights blazing from tiny diamond-paned windows tucked beneath overhanging eaves.

Tammy gulped in wine-sharp air, tasting the tang of heather as she stepped from the overheated car and, guided by a beam of light and by the sound of voices, made her way towards the entrance.

The interior was crowded with laughing, boisterous youngsters. As Dirk fought his way to the bar a young man carrying a tray full of drinks stumbled as he passed Tammy, catching her by the shoulder and jarring her against the wall. When he laughed and stumbled away without apology she bit her lip, acknowledging Aunt Honor's wisdom. These were not the sort of people with whom she was accustomed to associating. The mixed jumble of accents were not those of the fells. Most of the youngsters wore hiking gear, heavy jumpers under colourful anoraks, serviceable trousers tucked into the tops of thick-knit socks rising out of leather, metal-studded boots. Rucksacks were piled up against a whitewashed wall bearing old hunting prints, long brass horns and an assortment of ancient animal pelts. Pewter mugs suspended from the oak-beamed ceiling reflected flames leaping high from logs piled in the centre of a cavernous

fireplace around which groups of girls and boys sat cross-legged on the floor.

Just as Dirk was approaching with the drinks one of the girls began strumming a guitar. Dirk grimaced as he handed over her glass. "Sorry about this, Tammy, according to the landlord this jamboree was the idea of a student body who want to boost their ailing funds and bears no resemblance whatsoever to the genuine thing. When I protested to one of the organizers he had the barefaced cheek to reply: 'What's in a name, mate? Bed, booze and birds offer far more entertainment than clay pigeons and sheep!' "

He looked so woebegone Tammy had to laugh. Uncertainly, he joined in.

"You are a brick, Tammy, not one word of reproach! What do you think, now that we're here shall we give it a whirl?"

She glanced around at the thronging students. Not so long ago she had been at one with their uninhibited determination to enjoy whatever life might bring. The girls looked frank and friendly and only a tiny minority of the youths looked the worse for drink.

"Yes, why not!" She nodded assent as the girl singer's voice rose pleasantly on the air. "Now that we're here we might as well stay for an hour at least."

But one hour stretched into two and then to three until, caught up in the enjoyment of boisterous fun, friendly companionship and warm comfortable surroundings, midnight came and went without their being aware of it. A place had been made for them at the side of the fire where, once settled, the crush of bodies made it impossible to move. At first, the heat from the fire caused them some discomfort, but as the flames gradually died and were not replenished a pleasant drowsiness had overtaken Tammy and gradually her head had begun

to nod, so that when Dirk offered an accommodating shoulder she had snuggled close, glad to use it as a pillow.

The discordant twanging of a guitar string awakened her. She jerked upright and rubbed her eyes. All around her students were draped in various degrees of fatigue. A few were sleeping where they sat, others were huddled together swaying in time to the subdued tune being plucked from the solitary guitar. In one corner a group were involved in discussion, but keeping their voices low so as not to intrude upon the pleasure of others. The bar had long since closed and as she scrambled to her feet her horrified glance fell accusingly upon Dirk.

"Why didn't you waken me? We should have left hours ago ...!"

He shrugged. "You looked so contented—at peace for the first time in weeks—I hadn't the heart to disturb you."

She glanced at her watch and paled. "It's after two—if I've been missed the aunts will be worried. I must phone them."

"Sorry, love," he eased himself upright, "there's no phone here, you'll have to wait until we reach the valley. There's a kiosk in the village."

"Then let's go!" Her voice rang with an urgency traced through with fear. A surreptitious night out was daring enough, but she could not begin to contemplate Adam's reaction if he were to discover her creeping into Fox Hall in the early hours of the morning.

They went outside and found that the terrain, characteristically temperamental, was steeped in the mood of winter. Frost was sparkling on every leaf and branch, granite rock seemed veined with silver as moonlight played upon its iced surface. Their footsteps crunched as they walked across to the car and with a murmur of annoyance Dirk began rubbing vigorously to clear the iced-up windscreen.

"Don't stand there freezing, Tammy, get inside and start up the engine!"

He flung her the keys and she grasped them in fingers already numb, but when she turned on the ignition and tried to rev up the only response from the engine was a fitful whir. Feeling cold inside, she tried again, and again, praying under her breath that her worst fears would not be confirmed. Then Dirk's face appeared at the side window.

"It's no use," he looked unusually grim, "I'm afraid the battery is flat."

"It can't be!" She shook her head, her eyes imploring. "It *mustn't* be...!"

But it was.

The landlord could not help them much. "A road patrol is based at the top of this rise, but won't put in an appearance until morning. I'm sorry I can't offer you accommodation, as you can see for yourself the inn is chock-a-block with students and the best part of them are spending the night on the floor in sleeping bags. You can join them if you have a mind," he concluded sympathetically, "provided, that is, that you can find a space."

By this time Tammy's teeth had begun to chatter and a cold dread that was far from physical caused her to stutter as she pleaded with Dirk.

"I must get back to Fox Hall tonight! As it is, Adam will be furious..."

Dirk tried to reassure her. "Adam isn't all that unreasonable, Tammy. The locals are used to strangers being stranded on the fells, he's bound to understand."

It's you who doesn't understand-, she wanted to scream. This situation would be bound to prod the sleeping giant awake and she would be the one to suffer his wrath. Battling down rising hysteria, she swung from the car with swift decision.

"I'm going to walk! Somewhere along the road I'm bound to get a lift."

She set off with purposeful strides, but was checked by Dirk's furious grip upon her shoulder.

"Don't be a little fool," he crisped. "Fox Hall is miles away and transport is as rare as sunshine in this area at this time of the morning! You're coming back to the inn with me."

"I am not!" Beyond reason, she began to struggle, so determined to have her way Dirk had no option but to use brute force in order to keep her there. Roughly he grabbed, pinioning her arms to her sides, imprisoning her against his body. "*Let me go!*" Tammy hissed, held in such a restricting embrace she could barely move.

"Not until you promise to be sensible," he juttet, bending his head closer in order to reason with her. "Listen to me, Tammy..."

Car headlights breasted the rise and swung into the car park, spotlighting in their beam a couple who seemed clasped in tight embrace.

"A car!" Tammy gasped, pulling out of Dirk's grasp to run towards the vehicle that had swung in a wide arc before braking a few feet away.

It was a substantial land rover, she noted thankfully, her lips already framing an urgent request to the driver. But the words froze on her lips when a familiar figure stepped out of the car. "Adam . . .!" she

whispered, trepidation making her voice sound unwelcome, the catch in her throat guilty.

"Yes, Adam." He folded his arms across his chest and stared, pinpointing furious eyes upon her frightened face. "Sorry to have to break up the romantic interlude," his cold glance slewed towards the slowly advancing Dirk, then flicked back to her face. "The aunts were anxious when they discovered you were missing, then Aunt Honor recalled a conversation which seemed to offer a clue to your whereabouts. Your inconsiderate action has caused her quite a lot of grief—that's why, much against my better judgement, I offered to come and fetch you."

His austere tone, his attitude of leashed anger, made it obvious that he would have preferred to throw the pair of them down the mountain. The sleeping giant had, indeed, been aroused. An inner furnace of fury bound by an outer glacial crust was threatening any minute to erupt! A sharp hail of words was yet to come, Tammy realized as he bundled her into the land rover, the few he had allowed himself were a mere shower warning of a tempest.

Numbed by the thought, she huddled into her seat, wanting to explain Dirk's predicament yet not daring to say a word. Adam's controlled manipulation of the gears was more frightening than a display of temper; her troubled mind registered a pang of envy as the land rover swished past Dirk, leaving him stranded atop of the frostbitten fell.

He spared no time on words during the furious drive home. Enclosed in a vacuum of numbness wherein she could neither speak, think, nor feel, an interminable hour passed then, as he swung up the drive and screeched to a halt outside of Fox Hall the door was flung open and Aunt Honor appeared, her quivering features made clearly visible by light streaming from the hallway.

"My dear . . .!" She stumbled forward to clasp Tammy in her arms. "We've been so worried, even though we didn't doubt that Adam would eventually find you. Why didn't you let us know you were going out?" The quavering voice broke. "It's always wise to leave a message as to your whereabouts in case of accidents, there are so many dangers in the fells," she babbled on, almost incoherent in her relief, "especially at this time of the year when they seem deliberately to set traps for unwary strangers. But here am I keeping you standing outside—you must be frozen! Come away in, Vinnie is making a hot drink and putting a bottle in your bed."

Feeling not a little ashamed, Tammy allowed Aunt Honor to guide her indoors, but when she began ushering her towards the stairs Adam took control.

"Go to bed now, Aunt Honor, I'll see to Tammy— And I'll take that!" He whipped a tray containing a steaming mug of cocoa from under Aunt Vinnie's astonished nose and indicated that she should follow her sister upstairs. "Come with me," he directed Tammy coldly, "you can drink this in my study."

Exchanging worried glances, the two aunts hurried to do as they had been bid, Aunt Honor casting Tammy a sympathetic look as she scurried upstairs. Feeling deserted, forlorn and very much in awe of the grim sentinel waiting for her to precede him into his study, Tammy cast a longing look in the aunts' wake before progressing on leaden feet in the direction he had indicated.

Easing her shaking limbs into a chair near to the fire, she held her frozen fingers to the dying embers. Her frenetic glance was caught and held by the motto carved deeply into the oak mantelpiece: "*There'll be moonlight again.*" Everywhere she looked in this house that promise seemed to taunt her, but the pity of it was, all her moonlight nights seemed cursed by incident. Rebellion rose, and with it a little of the Maxwell spirit.

"Well, let's have the lecture and get it over with!" she cast across a defiant shoulder. "No use my trying to explain, I know you're in no mood to listen. Baron Fox has seen, judged, and condemned—so when do I go to the hanging tree?"

She ought to have known better than to be flippant with a man already pushed to the limit. A moment later she was airborne, literally lifted from her feet and set down with jarring force directly in front of him.

"Your uncaring, selfish attitude defies credibility!" he ground. "You care nothing for the feelings of others, are utterly shameless in your quest for pleasure at any cost, a wanton, empty-headed little fool whose only aim in life is to add yet another scalp to her already laden belt!" He shook her so hard her teeth rattled. "*Damn you!*" "You make me want to ignore every civilized instinct that tells me a woman ought not to be thrashed. How easily I can understand and forgive the savage thirst for revenge that kept my ancestors forever on the trail of the devious Maxwells! If only you were a man," his grip tightened with such intent she whimpered, "then I could purge my contempt in the traditional way, with physical violence. As it is, I must resort to a much less satisfying method of chastisement..."

Almost snarling, he took her hips, purging his frustration with a kiss so violent it drew blood from her quivering bottom hip, inflicting a savage scar upon her heart she knew she would retain for the rest of her life. It seemed to last for ever, a lesson in contempt more punishing than a blow, more shocking than a lash of words, that left her with invisible, painfully pulsating bruises. Then he pushed her away and strode out of the room without a backward glance, his haste evidencing the fact that he could not bear her in his sight a moment longer.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

FOR three days afterwards Tammy remained in her room nursing a badly bruised lip and lacerated pride, then when finally she nerved herself to go downstairs for meals she chose her times carefully to coincide with Adam's absence.

She was fortunate that in the following weeks he was kept too busy to become aware of the wan girl creeping about the corridors of Fox Hall, starting at every footfall, jerking away from shadows flitting around the ancient hall. An unhappy ghost of the laughing, impudent young girl who, in the space of two months, had managed to resurrect a feud lain dormant for centuries.

Surprisingly, Aunt Vinnie emerged as her stoutest ally. Though uttering not one word of reproach against Adam, allowing only disapproving sniffs and censorious frowns to convey displeasure at 'his treatment of his new bride, she managed to get across to Tammy the message that she was on her side. But Adam's severe attitude would brook no interference from the aunts. While the boy they both loved would have tolerated a chiding, Baron Fox would not.

It was Aunt Vinnie who urged Tammy to go outdoors to watch the sheep clipping. "Everyone for miles around gathers to watch the men clipping and marking, catching and bundling. The womenfolk are kept busy serving food and jugs of ale to wash it down." Tammy abandoned her almost completed embroidery and gazed listlessly out of the window. Somehow the fells looked different. Then she discovered why. Snowdrop sheep were scattered for miles across a carpet of summer green. Close to the house, an old tup whose fierce look had often caused her qualms, had been reduced to half its size and consequently seemed far less frightening. The ewes that only yesterday had had a fat, comfortable appearance could have been a completely different species with long spindly legs and slim trunks. Tammy sighed, deciding without enthusiasm to take Aunt Vinnie's

advice and seek some fresh air. If she did not wander far from the house there would be no fear of encountering Adam. Her heart lurched. He was busy in the valley overseeing the clippers and if his routine did not vary he would not arrive back until late evening to snatch a few hours' sleep before rising again at the break of dawn.

She wandered outside and leant her arms against a gate. They were bringing down the ewes for clipping. The road was jammed with a jostling stream of animals, the air raucous with their bewildered bleating and baaing. High upon the fellside black-coated Border collies with bushy tails were roaming restlessly backwards and forwards chivvying down the reluctant sheep. She watched, wondering at the dogs' intelligence as they combed the crags, winking out sheep from the ravines, coaxing them from ledges, rushing back to marshal a timid pair who had decided not to join the panic-stricken flock.

Curiosity drove her down to the valley where the sheep, herded into pens, were awaiting their turn to be clipped. Men were sitting on benches with sacks across their knees, quickly snicking away at fleeces which they then peeled like orange skins from the sheeps' backs. The animals' legs were tied and Tammy could not help but laugh as, registering first indignation then resignation, they suffered the indignity of being shorn before, looking naked and ridiculously funny, they trotted away to join the rest of the denuded flock.

Engrossed, she lingered for the better part of an hour, then made cowardly by a glimpse of tousled dark dark head, she walked quickly away in the direction of Fox Hall. Once safe, she slowed to marvel at the sight of lambs being reunited with their mothers, puzzled by the way they seemed immediately to recognize which was their own. Her surprise must have been visible, because a voice at her side supplied the information,

"There can be no question of recognition by sight, the feat is performed by smell alone. All sheep may smell alike to you and me, but not to a young lamb."

Tammy swung round with dread in her heart, recognizing the slightly supercilious tone even before her glance fell upon Pam's patronising features. She drew a deep breath to steady her nerves.

"Thank you for telling me—I had been wondering."

"I, too, have been wondering." There was nothing friendly about the way Pam fell into step. "I've been wondering how much longer you intend staying where you're not wanted. The pretence of being a happily- married bride must surely be wearing thin. Adam, I know, is chafing at the bit."

Strange how the anticipation of trouble causes tremors that disappear at the moment of attack. Tammy almost welcomed the direct challenge, it brought back the sparkle to her eyes and stiffness to her spine.

"Are you sure your knowledge isn't born of wishful thinking?" she queried sweetly.

A rush of red hot colour did nothing for Pam's looks, Tammy speculated. Small wonder she always strove to appear calm.

"A woman can size up a man's feelings pretty accurately, especially when she's seeing him regularly. The whole countryside is remarking upon Adam's good fortune in having a bride who makes so few inroads into his time," Pam returned with waspish spite. "Why don't you admit defeat and go back to London? Here, you're totally out of place, a perpetual embarrassment to Adam, who's very sensitive to the criticism of his friends. It isn't that we don't like you," her tone developed a false kindness that set Tammy's teeth on edge, "but in

this very industrious society there's no room for mere passengers, which is all you are—a useless, decorative piece of femininity, pleasing to the eye but purely non-productive. Mountain men seek one essential quality in a wife and that is an ability to partner them in their work. Take today, for instance. While you've been about your ladylike pleasures I've been supervising the provision of food and drink for the clippers. Adam asked me to help out and I was glad to oblige! The aunts are far too old to cope with such a strenuous chore, and you—well!" Pam shrugged, letting silence speak for itself. "If you care anything at all about Adam you'll go back to where you came from and waste no time in setting him free."

Tammy almost choked on her anger, but then a spear of pride jabbed an answer from her constricted throat.

"You make my husband sound like a weak-kneed character with no mind of his own! You have perhaps known him longer, but I certainly know him better than to believe him capable of discussing our private affairs with an outsider!" She drew herself tall, feeling dwarfed by Pam's superior height. "When, and if, Adam wants his freedom he'll tell me so himself. Up until now, however," she watched Pam narrowly, "his attitude towards me has been far from indifferent."

She felt a swell of triumph when Pam's lips tightened just enough to betray anxiety. Then for pride's sake, she employed a desperate bluff. Instilling into her tone a shade of pity, she remarked lightly, "Man is at heart a polygamous beast whose multitudinous needs could be satisfied only by several women of distinctly differing characteristics. Unfortunately for him, the laws of society forbid him more than one wife, as it's highly unlikely that one woman would ever completely satisfy all of his needs, he must, when he chooses a wife, decide which quality he considers most desirable. As you've already pointed out, my housewifely skills fall so far short of perfection Adam has been forced to turn to you for help. But there is one area in which I'm perhaps more proficient. Ask yourself, Pam," she urged softly, "what

other hunger is there that can blind a man to dust on the mantelpiece and indifferent meals upon the table...?"

At heart Pam was a prude! Tammy rejoiced, wickedly delighted by the embarrassment her meaningful remarks had caused the older girl.

"You're nothing but a cheap little tramp!" Pam spat, spinning on her heel in order to put as much distance as possible between herself and Tammy's outrageously impudent grin.

But Tammy's feeling of triumph soon died. Although she had emerged the victor some of Pam's barbs had hurt like the devil, especially the one about Adam having to ask her to help out with the clipping. This chore was one she felt she could have coped with easily, but he had given her no chance to try. Instead he had chosen Pam as his deputy, thereby adding fuel to the flame of gossip which, according to Pam, was running riot through the community.

For the rest of the day she remained in her room, nursing fast-growing resentment of Adam's action. Until their marriage was dissolved he at least owed her loyalty, she fumed, pacing away the hours of daylight. "I'll have it out with him tonight," she muttered. "However tired he might be I'll insist upon speaking to him the moment he comes in!"

Fear forgotten, she prowled restlessly, unable to settle to any physical chore while her mind seethed. Because she had refused dinner the sympathetic aunts had carried a tray up to her room, but she left it untouched, finding it impossible to force even a spoonful of soup between her lips.

It was almost midnight when the land rover crunched up the "drive. Without stopping to think, Tammy ran downstairs and stood inwardly trembling in the hallway, so motionless Adam almost bumped into her as he strode through the doorway.

His hand shot out to steady her. "Why aren't you in bed?" he enquired coldly, withdrawing his hand as if it had been scorched.

"There's a matter I want to discuss with you," she replied with equal coolness, determined not to be browbeaten into timidity.

"Can't it wait?" Showing signs of irritability, he discarded his coat before striding past her into the study where he poured himself a drink. Muscles rippled in his throat as he tossed back his head and downed the lot in one gulp. Immediately he poured out another, without inviting her to join him. "Well... ?" He carried his glass to a chair, sat down and stretched out his legs, relaxing against a cushion with a sigh of relief.

It was not the moment for confrontation, she sensed, yet resentment would allow her no rest until it was vocally expressed.

"I was talking to Pam today," she began in a rush.

"Nice for you," he murmured, closing his eyes. "She can speak expertly on most subjects."

"Including that of our marriage!" she charged bitterly.

His expression did not change, but he went very still, in the manner of a fox who sleeps with one eye open. Tammy knew she held his complete attention.

"You spoke the other night of my living up to the demands of my station, yet you belittle me by going over my head and asking Pam to undertake my responsibilities—the supervision of food and drink for the clippers," she enlightened him.

Thick black lashes lifted over incredulous blue eyes. "Besides the fact that you're incapable of organizing such a function, I had no idea you were even remotely interested in doing so."

"You could have asked me!" she burst back. "But of course," she continued, heavily sarcastic, "I'd forgotten how busy you've been, squiring Pam around the neighbourhood, giving rise not only to gossip but strengthening the conviction that as a wife I'm a total dead loss! So confident has Pam become she as good as told me to get out of your life to make room for herself. You might have spared me that, Adam! You could have taken the time to rid yourself of one woman before taking on another!"

He did not stir but remained in his chair seemingly quite relaxed. Eyeing her calmly, he spelled out,

"To me, Pam has always epitomised the ideal fell farmer's wife. She's the perfect woman—poised, capable, highly competent in every aspect of farming life as well as being a good-looking female with plenty of natural charm." As the list of virtues fell from his lips Tammy's soul quietly shrivelled and died. "But I would never give her grounds for thinking there could be anything more than friendship between us—not yet, at least. It wouldn't be fair to her, to myself, or to you."

As he rose to his feet Tammy saw that he was showing signs of strain and felt guilty about keeping him from his bed. It seemed, however, that he had not yet finished.

"We both know that this marriage of ours is a very temporary affair, but I hadn't thought it necessary to assure you that while you remain my wife you will retain my loyalty, my protection and," he hesitated, "a certain amount of regard. So far as I'm aware, I've done nothing to warrant the accusation of giving people room to gossip, nor will I

ever, not so long as I have a wife residing in my home. Now," he concluded heavily, "do you mind if I go to bed?"

Compunction smote her. He looked so dreadfully weary. In an impulsive gesture of atonement she ran forward and threw her arms around his waist. She could have been hugging a lump of granite for all the response he made, but that did not deter her spate of words.

"Adam, I'm sorry I'm such a trial to you—I did so want to be a good farmer's wife, but you've never given me the chance to try! There's been nothing but misunderstanding right from the start. Please, Adam," she dared a look into his impassive face, "won't you try to wipe from your mind all those preconceived ideas of my being useless, flighty, selfish—all those things you said? I want our marriage to work! I love you, Adam," she gulped, "I love you so desperately I'll break my heart if ever you send me away!"

His body was an unyielding rock that offered no hope to her clutching hands. He stepped aside leaving her feeling poised on the edge of an abyss, head swimming, fingers grasping thin air.

It might have been fatigue, but she preferred to think he was not entirely unmoved when, in a much less harsh voice, he instructed,

"Pull yourself together, Tammy, you're overwrought, the aftermath of 'flu can play havoc with the emotions. In a few weeks' time when you're stronger you'll regret that rash statement." She shook her head as a prelude to protesting her sincerity, but he avoided looking at her distressed face and stared across her shoulder. "Since your arrival here you've done nothing to make me revise my original opinion. You're young and impulsive and because of your previous spoilt existence you're covetous of anything you're told you can't have. If only one of your actions had borne the stamp of responsibility I might have begun to change my mind, but none of them did. In no way have you changed from the spoilt, capricious brat I first brought here.

Show me that you're capable of patience and a modicum of restraint, prove to me—just once—that you're capable of completing any industrious task, then I might be tempted to forget all the solid, sensible arguments against keeping you here." He reached towards the door. "This conversation has gone on long enough," he indicated with a nod that she should precede him, "I'm too darned tired to argue further."

Mutely, Tammy led the way upstairs, halting outside the door of her room where Adam took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, brooding down at her troubled face. "These few months of marriage have been a battlefield of trauma and strife. You've been upset and unhappy and now you're confused, too confused to know your own mind. Soon the clipping will be over and after that the Show, by then we should both be clear-headed enough to decide what's to be done with you..."

To stem further argument he pushed her inside her bedroom and closed the door. She stood stock still listening to movements from next door, then when she heard him switch off the light she moved across to the window, staring with unseeing eyes out into the night.

She had been put on probation!

From now until the day of the Show Adam would be coldly and clinically assessing her merits and demerits before deciding finally whether or not to let her

remain here as his wife! A dry sob escaped her. She did not know whether to jump for joy or to cry with despair.

Her spirits lifted at the thought that even an uneasy armistice was better than a feud. Given the chance of closer understanding she might be able to convince him that she was a mature, passionate woman and not the acquisitive child he thought her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ON the morning of the County Show Tammy awoke feeling this was to be the most momentous day of her life. She lay thinking, savouring the delights to come.

First of all, there was to be a whole day in Adam's company. The aunts would be present, of course, but not all of the time; they would be sure to circulate amongst their friends. Then would come the judging of the entries. Her work, with the help of Aunt Honor, had been carefully packed and delivered to the site, fees paid, and two precious slips of paper bearing the numbers of her entries handed over—proof of the industry of which Adam had declared her incapable! But most important of all, this was to be the day of decision, the last day of the probationary period he had outlined.

The intervening weeks had not been wasted. She had managed to spend part of each day with him, sometimes for a mere five minutes at other times an hour, but on each occasion their truce had strengthened until, incredibly, the atmosphere between them was almost friendly!

She sat up and stretched, her lips curving into a complacent smile. The only barrier keeping them apart was Adam's reluctance to admit defeat. She smiled, remembering isolated incidents when a sudden flare of feeling had darkened his eyes almost to black, the times his voice had hoarsened when he spoke her name, the rigidity of his body when once she had been tempted to sidle up to him and press her cheek against his powerfully beating heart.

She jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom, determined to be at her prettiest and best when she went to meet him.

"You and the aunts have no need to rise early," he had commanded the evening before. "I shall be at the showground shortly after

sunrise, but if you three arrive about lunchtime it will be soon enough."

The aunts exchanged pleased smiles when Tammy tripped downstairs looking dew-fresh in a dress of deep pink cotton, sleeveless, with a tiny waist and full circular skirt.

"How radiant you look!" Aunt Honor smiled.

"Aye, Adam will be proud of the lass," Aunt Vinnie allowed, gruff of voice but soft of glance.

Tammy kissed them both, urgently wanting to confide her hopes but unwilling to tilt at fate. In any case, they were both so adept at reading the moods of those they loved that explanation was unnecessary.

"Are we ready?" She shoed them towards the door. "It's almost twelve and I promised Adam we'd meet him at one."

"No doubt he'll wait," Aunt Vinnie unbent far enough to tease. "He's hung around you plenty these past weeks." Both she and Aunt Honor laughed aloud when Tammy's complexion vied with the pink of her dress.

The morning had begun wet, but now the sun was out and as Tammy drove towards the hills surrounding the valley where the show was being held they seemed to smile down at her. By the time she had parked the car and walked with the aunts past a small marquee from which the secretary of the Show was directing operations, sun was beaming down upon the packed, natural arena, a lush valley ringed by hills, watered by streams, ceilinged by a sky blue as Adam's eyes, with here and there the merest puff of cloud crowning the surrounding peaks.

They passed the cattle rings where, within an aura of great excitement, they were about to choose the best animal in the show.

"Any cattle breeder will tell you that it simply can't be done," Aunt Vinnie snorted. "How can one compare a good Shorthorn with a good Ayrshire or a good Friesian? Nevertheless the fools will try!"

Sturdy men in gumboots and white coats were slowly guiding around the ring an assortment of bored cows for the benefit of judges who were jotting things down in notebooks. One of the judges walked over to a cow, lifted up its tail, patted its belly, then shaking his head sadly rejoined his colleagues.

"Play-acting!" Aunt Vinnie scoffed. "That beast will probably win!"

Tammy scoured the arena for Adam and saw his dark head towering above a company of men gathered near the sheep pens. The moment she spotted him he looked up and caught her eye. It was as if an electric current ran from him to her, clearing every obstacle in its path, its magnetism drawing them slowly together.

When they met he reached for her. hand and uncurled her fingers to imprint a kiss upon her palm. She grasped it tightly as if fearing it might wing away, startled by the unusually demonstrative show of affection.

"Hello, Tammy." His greeting was husked and low.

"Hello, Adam," she breathed, her heart in her eyes, "we've just this minute arrived."

"I know," he glinted, "I've been watching out for you."

The admission startled her heart into soaring flight. Their slow move towards -loser understanding had taxed her patience sorely, but she

was only now beginning to realize that the restraint he had imposed had been very much worthwhile. He had been testing her maturity and the warmth of his greeting was like the bestowing of a prize.

"Are you hungry?" Without waiting for her reply he took her elbow and began leading her towards the marquee where lunches were being served. "Better to eat early and avoid the crush."

"But what about the aunts?" she protested weakly. "Won't they be joining us?"

"They'll find their own way," he overruled suavely, his unprecedented desire for her company sending her already erratic heartbeats into a frenzy.

They lunched together at a table for two set apart from the crowd in a quiet corner of the marquee. Tammy had no idea what she ate. Adam's sombre gravity had fallen from him like a cloak, revealing the teasing, bantering side to his nature she had glimpsed once before. It augured well for the decision he had hinted was to be made today; brilliant blue eyes would hardly be sliding over her with approval, smiles would not sit so readily upon his lips if he intended telling her later that he wanted her to return to London. A flutter in her throat went wild as she caught his eye; today the mountain raven seemed willing to peck out of her hand!

She would have been content to remain in their corner for the rest of the day and when the aunts scurried up to break into their isolation she felt almost annoyed.

"Quickly, Tammy, the judging of the painting and embroidery section is about to begin! From remarks we've heard, your entries seem certain to win a prize. Have you seen them, Adam, they're both quite outstanding?" Aunt Honor's eyes glistened with pride. "They put all the rest in the shade—Pam and her aunt are livid!"

Adam's eyebrows registered surprise, but he made no comment as they all walked across to the tent housing the exhibits. Feeling quite sick with apprehension, Tammy waited for his reaction. The judges, two women and a man, were walking slowly around the stall set out with exquisite samples of embroiderers' skill. Her own piece was displayed to advantage so that exotic birds—so lifelike in appearance one felt tempted to offer a finger as a perch—stood out excitingly alive from the matt background. Colourful foliage twined and twisted, heavily laden with bursts of blossom with petals shading gradually from the palest to the most brilliant of hues. The minute stitches brought oohs and aahs of admiration from the spectators and Tammy blushed with excitement when the judges unanimously agreed that the first prize be awarded to entry number fifteen.

"Tammy, Tammy, that's you!" Aunt Honor did a jig of delight. "Oh, I'm so proud I could *burst!*"

Even Vinnie was moved to bestow a peck of approval upon her flushed cheek. "Well done, my dear, well done."

Tammy turned to face Adam, anxious to hear his comments. He looked incredulous, startled, then pulling himself together he took hold of her hand to examine manicured nails, pink-tinted to match her dress, and slender fingers that looked incapable of labour. "I had no idea ..." he began slowly. "You must have laboured very diligently to achieve such a lot in such a short time. Yet I never actually saw you working. When...?"

"Mostly while I was alone in my room," she blushed. "I wanted to keep it as a surprise, so if ever you walked in on me unexpectedly I pushed it under a cushion or something until after you'd left."

"I see . . ." He had the conscience to redden.

"Come along!" Aunt Honor tugged at their sleeves. "The painting exhibits are over here!"

They pushed their way through the crowd, but were too late to catch the winning announcement. Tammy and the aunts craned their necks, stood on tiptoe to see where the winning rosette had been placed, but had to rely upon Adam's superior height which enabled him to see over the crowd of heads to supply the information.

"Number ten ..." he told them blankly. "Lady Fox of Fox Hall."

Then she was whirled from the tent, literally lifted from her feet as, barely allowing her toes time to touch the ground, he propelled her outside and continued ushering her forward until he found a quiet space at the back of the first aid tent. Tammy searched his face, wondering at his stunned, disconcerted expression.

"You've made quite a fool of me, haven't you? You must have had many a quiet chuckle behind my back, pretending to be whiling away the hours while in reality you were caught up in a hive of industry. No doubt the secrecy was deliberate—engineered so that the final outcome would astound me? Well, I'm astounded and not a little ashamed of my caustic statements. I owe you an apology, Tammy; obviously you're far from being a useless brat—and if I could be wrong about that I could be wrong about other things ..."

An electric second, barely long enough to contain the current that snaked between them, was shattered by a voiced interruption, frigid in tone.

"Sorry to intrude, but as one of the organizing committee I've been asked to round up all the prize-, winners for interview with the local press. I believe you're to be congratulated, Tammy?" Somehow Pam managed to force the admission past tight lips. "Seemingly you've had more than your fair share of beginner's luck."

When she spun on her heel and began to walk away, obviously expecting them to follow, Adam sent Tammy a conspiratorial grin that made her want to laugh. They were still enjoying the shared joke when the last voice Tammy ever expected to hear in the fellside rang out, its jeering note compelling attention.

"Welly well, if it isn't Tammy, sly little cat! Miss Touch-me-not Maxwell, heroine of the embroidery class! I can't wait to get back to London to tell your old mates!"

It was" Steve Harris, his vindictiveness hoarded like a canker for just this moment.

"What . . . what are you doing here . . . ?" Tammy whispered, her eyes registering the death of all her hopes. She had no illusions about Steve and the vengeance he would extract as payment for his stricken pride. But she had thought him miles away, too far for his spite to reach.

Adam's voice scythed through the awkward silence. Sounding very much the lord of the mountains, he icily indicted,

"You have the tendencies of a crone when it comes to gossip, Harris! You're out of your environment here— I suggest you return to the hole out of which you crept!"

Steve's pallid complexion went a shade greyer. Turning his back on Adam, he addressed Tammy.

"I'm on a prolonged holiday. Thanks to the squeal of your father's money and my editor's acute sense of hearing I was sacked. But Cumbria was not too far to come to seek revenge, especially when they refused to believe that the situation I reported was deliberately set up by yourself and that you personally telephoned me to ensure that I would be in at the kill. As usual, Tammy, you've succeeded in getting what you wanted," his sideways glance rested briefly upon

Adam, "without sparing a thought for the injuries inflicted upon your friends."

The cold knot of dread in Tammy's stomach tightened. At least the milling crowd had drifted away, leaving only Pam, Adam and Steve to witness her humiliation.

"Would you please explain that statement?" Adam's cold request reached across her shoulder.

Steve was only too ready to oblige. "Don't tell me you're unaware of the trick Tammy played upon you that night?" He laughed aloud in disbelief. "You backwoodsmen are noted for your naivete, but even so, you must have guessed that she took out that boat knowing there wasn't sufficient fuel in the tank even if you hadn't got around to suspecting that it was she who phoned me to ensure that I would be waiting with my camera to record the adventure for posterity?"

"You did that.. . ?" Adam's eyes fastened upon her guilty face, bleak and forbidding as the crag guarding his home.

"I... I..." She licked her dry lips, her mind grasping and discarding excuses with the speed of her agitated eyelashes. At the time it had seemed a harmless bit of fun, but as outlined by Steve's vitriolic tongue it had assumed an aspect of cheap trickery.

"Of course she did!" Pam's voice revealed gloating triumph. "You were tricked, just as an earlier Fox was tricked by Maxwell guile! Poor, chivalrous Adam . . ."

Tammy could bear no more. As a battery of accusing eyes fell upon her she turned tail and ran towards the solitude of the adjacent hills, praying they would swallow her up so that never again would she come face to face with Adam's expression of furious disgust.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A CURIOUS cloud formation was forming above the fells which, if Tammy had been a local, would have warned her that the weather was about to change. Long, smooth, parallel bands of cloud that indicated plainly that the helm wind was about to blow. "A wind," Aunt Vinnie would have told her, "that could blow the neb off a goose".

But even if she had known, it would have had no effect upon her panic-stricken flight from her foes. Eyes blinded with tears, she gained the foothills, sped uphill along a path reaching high into the upper fells, and did not ease up until grass began giving way to scree beneath her feet. With pain tearing at her lungs she battled her way up the steep incline; she had almost reached the top when she was forced to surrender to an agonized call for rest from lungs and limbs. Uncaring of any damage she might do to her dress, she slid down behind a large boulder and with arms outflung across its cold surface laid down her head and wept.

A good hour passed before she was calm enough to revise the situation. Blind and deaf to every discomfort, she huddled against the rock and allowed her anguished mind to reiterate over and over again: *Your marriage is over. Adam loathes and despises you, you must go away.. .go away.. .go away...*

She had come to terms with the fact by the time the first drops of rain splashed against her hot cheeks.

She shivered, suddenly aware of the chill penetrating her light dress and flimsy underwear. Casting a glance across her shoulder, she froze. Just a few yards away a blanket of cloud was pressing forward, a slow, creeping menace which, during her heart-searching, had swallowed up the peaks and was now continuing its insidious descent.

She jumped to her feet, alarmed by a growl of thunder and a quickening patter of raindrops splashing big as plates upon the surface of a nearby stream. Too late now to recall Adam's many lectures on the folly of walking unsuitably equipped amongst the fells!

"Walking alone on the fells can be enjoyable, but it always involves great risk. Don't go out alone until you're more competent, and even then you must take special care and remember the difficulties which will arise if you have even a minor mishap."

She shivered again as his warning echoed in her ears and looked around, fearful that his tall, rangy figure might stride into view. Her mind reacted accordingly, marshalling the arguments she would put to the stern-faced autocrat if he hove into view: "It's been such a long, hot stifling day the sun was blazing out of a cloudless sky; heat dancing off the rocks; streams merely dribbling by . . . how could I possibly have foreseen a change in the weather?"

By the time her argument was concluded she was wet through to the skin. Only minutes before everywhere had been absolutely still, yet now a wind had risen, a curious rampaging sort of wind, warm but ominous. When lightning flashed across the darkening sky she began running down the fellside, her heart thumping, mouth dry with terror. Then as she sped along the path the hot summer afternoon became an inferno of noise and fury, with thunder crashing, lightning riving the heavens and water pouring as if from overturned buckets.

Tammy halted, gasping as she tried to peer out of rain-filled eyes. The path seemed to have disappeared into a slippery swamp and the slowly trickling streams were now torrents rushing down the fellside, carrying all before them in a frothing, furious rush. There was nothing else for it but to carry on. Earlier, before the storm had begun, she had glanced down without interest upon the just-discernible tops of the

marquees set out in the valley, so if she carried on cautiously she would be bound, sooner or later, to reach safety.

Then it happened just as Adam had said it would! The heel of her fashionable sandal caught in a root uncovered by the forceful deluge. She toppled over, falling heavily into a bank of fern that looked deceptively soft but hid a mound of flint-sharp boulders. Pain shot red-hot through her body as ribs, elbows and knees made sharp contact with the concealed rocks. She screamed, a sharp piercing scream that was swallowed up into the artillery of sound all around her. She tried to struggle upright, but fell back with a moan when her twisted ankle refused to support her weight.

A long-drawn-out, terror-stricken half hour passed before she heard a whistle. *Adam always carried a whistle!*

He had given one to her, accompanied by a warning that if ever she were walking on the fells she must carry it with her. He had even made her practise the international distress signal, six blasts at ten second intervals for a minute, then a minute's pause and another six blasts. At this moment it was lying in a drawer in her bedroom!

Desperately, she yelled, "I'm over here . . .! Please help, I'm hurt. . . over here . . . over here!" she continued, until her voice took on a dreamlike quality, echoing and bouncing against the sides of the black pit into which she felt herself sliding. "*Over here!*" she made one last desperate effort before a bottomless void opened up to receive her.

"Of all the crass, stupid little fools!" The savagery of the condemnation contrasted strangely with the gentleness of hands searching her body for injuries. Tammy blinked, then lifted heavy lashes, exploring Adam's storm-racked features with a look of bemused gratitude.

"You've found me ..." she whispered.

"Shut up and drink this!" The neck of a brandy flask was forced between her lips and tilted so that she was forced to gulp down the fiery liquid. With one hand holding her head steady and the other holding the flask Adam continued administering the brandy until he felt she was sufficiently recovered to answer questions.

"Your ankle is very swollen, did you twist it when you fell?"

"Yes;" she gulped, feeling very much of a nuisance. Then in a very small voice, "I'm afraid I can't walk..

"I guessed as much." He was uncompromisingly abrupt, making no effort to hide his aggravation behind soft replies. The solid sheet of rain had abated to a misty curtain; a stream had appeared where once the path had been, but low-lying cloud, shot through with struggling sun rays, was slowly dispersing from the peak tops.

Muscles rippled beneath Adam's sodden shirt as he stooped to lift her into his arms, grim amusement flitting across his lips as he surveyed the bedraggled, woebegone figure so different from the immaculately dressed girl he had greeted upon her arrival at the showground. Brown hair hanging in rats' tails was plastered to her head, giving her the look of a dejected urchin until the eye travelled further, down to where curves were prominently displayed by the flimsy dress clinging like a second skin, revealing an immodest line of pantie and bra.

Tammy blushed scarlet, following the direction of his eyes, and made a futile attempt to lift the sodden material from her limbs.

"What an enigma is woman," he observed dryly. "There have been occasions when I've seen you wearing much less—minus even a blush—so why the rush of maidenly modesty?"

She could not have told him, could not explain that his stormy eyes seemed suddenly to be so much bolder, the quirk of his lips more reckless, the dilated nostrils outrageously autocratic. The atmosphere between them had always been electric, a silent, seething force, but this time she felt she was out of her depth, rendered childishly awkward by an undercurrent of feeling she could not name. Anger? Aggravation? What powerful force was causing Adam such inner turmoil he was having to tread heavily on an emotional brake?

It was exquisite torture being carried down the mountainside in his arms, feeling for the last time the strong beat of his heart, letting her head fall against his shoulder in order to bury secret farewell kisses on the fringe of his collar, tightening an arm around his neck as an excuse to caress his firm tanned skin with trembling fingers. Very soon she would be the ex-Baroness Fox—the thought stabbed from her a small cry of pain.

"What's wrong?" He sounded almost concerned.

"Nothing... that is, I thought I was about to sneeze."

She could have sworn his worried frown was genuine.

"We must hurry and get you into a hot bath. To avoid delay, when we reach the showground we'll skirt the perimeter until we reach the car, then, given luck, slip away without being noticed. The aunts will have no difficulty cadging a lift."

A burden of worry slipped from Tammy's shoulders. All she wanted was to get away without ever setting eyes on Pam again; the very idea of having to acknowledge her own defeat and her enemy's triumph made her Maxwell pride squirm.

Everything went according to plan—as Adam's wishes generally did. Everyone was sheltering from the storm inside the marquees so the

car park was deserted; only an elderly attendant was present to raise his eyebrows at the sight of a soaked girl being dumped unceremoniously into a car by an equally wet, black-browed man.

Adam drove like fury along deserted roads and when they reached the house wasted no time in ushering Tammy upstairs, tersely instructing as he carried her into the bathroom,

"If you sit on this stool do you think you'll be able to manage to get out of those wet clothes while I run your bath?"

"Yes, of course, the ankle isn't too bad now, in fact, I'm almost certain it will take my weight." Her reply was swift, too swift.

"Good, then if nothing else, perhaps this experience will teach you not to wander alone on the fells in future. But lectures can keep until you're in a mood to appreciate that when I give an order I expect it to be obeyed. Now get those clothes off!" he snapped life into her lethargic movements, "unless, of course, you've decided you need my help?"

She started with alarm. "No, thank you," she stammered, "I can manage."

"Pity..." he drawled with a puzzling inflection, "then I'd better get downstairs and make you a hot drink. Don't take too long over your bath."

She spent longer than she intended, simply because her mind was occupied mulling over his words. He had mentioned the future. What future? There was no place for her here at Fox Hall; as soon as her ankle was better she intended packing her bags and returning to London—before Adam ordered her to go!

She was dusting her body with talcum powder when he strode into the bathroom, betraying not so much as a blink at his own temerity. The glance he flicked over her was impersonal, nevertheless Tammy felt scalded.

"Good, you're almost dry! I've brought up your drink and popped a bottle into your bed, so if you're ready I'll carry you through."

Scarlet with embarrassment, she grabbed her wrap from the floor. There was a devil of mischief lurking in his eyes that she had no intention of provoking.

"Thank you," her voice was shaking, "but I can manage alone. I mustn't pamper myself if I'm to leave for London almost immediately."

"I thought you might be thinking along those lines," he admitted. "However, there's no need. I've decided to allow you to stay."

His words should have filled her with joy. She wanted so much to stay. The thought of life without him was agony, yet instead of grovelling her thanks for his forgiveness caution prompted her to ask,

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I suppose I've become used to having you around. I would probably miss you if you weren't here."

"Like you would miss a fawning kitten or a twittering canary?"

"Not quite," his lips twitched. "Neither of those objects has the power to raise my blood pressure."

"Ah ...!" The exclamation was almost a sob. "What you mean is that you find me physically attractive, so, after due consideration, you have decided I might make a more accommodating partner than

Pamela!" She felt a sensation of nausea when Adam did not bother to deny her accusation. He was so sure of her, so convinced she was putty in his hands, he did not trouble to resort to wooing—bare statement of fact was enough!

Keeping tight control over a blinding wave of anger, Tammy trod as cautiously as a sparrow in the proximity of a cat.

"What about the trick I played on you, am I to be forgiven that? And my utter uselessness as a wife, my spoilt capricious nature—are you prepared to overlook those too?"

He moved so quickly she had no time to dodge the arms that reached out to pull her savagely against his hard body. Thickly he murmured, "Wilful, tempestuous, tantalizing child! There have been times when I've told myself I must send you back to where you belong, to luxury, indulgence and freedom from care. But holding you like this, with your perfume filling my nostrils, your soft body quivering, your heart beating at one with mine, I forget all the solid sensible arguments against keeping you here and remember only how your slender waist fits snugly into the crook of my arm, how delightful you can be when you're happy, how eagerly you offer everything of yourself without reservation. You're such a tempting baggage," his voice hoarsened, "I can no longer resist taking what you've so generously offered in the past. I want you, Tammy, want you for my wife!"

Furiously she pulled out of his arms and stood quivering, a bundle of feminine outrage, just out of reach.

"If this is the sort of deal Meg Maxwell settled for then I'm ashamed to own her! How very magnanimous of you to overlook my many faults and how very convenient for you if I should be fool enough to accept your sacrifice! But no, thank you, Baron Fox, I don't want to remain here on sufferance, to live for the rest of my life like a grateful

serf, forever conscious of the great honour bestowed upon me by my generously- forgiving husband. To *hell* with that!"

She choked, beside herself with rage and sorrow, sorrow that Adam had never once mentioned the word that would have sent her grovelling at his feet—*love!*

He remained very still, staring stonily into her flashing brown eyes while he digested the insult of having his proposal thrown back in his face. Finally, with silence stretching elastic-tight between them, he was driven to question,

"To what extent has Beattie influenced your decision?"

For the moment the implication eluded her. She looked lost and very young, balancing on one foot to ease the nagging pain of her ankle, her flushed cheeks outstanding against the collar of her white robe, mouth quivering with hurt, eyes wounded but nursing in their depth a ghost of Maxwell pride.

"I don't understand," she quavered. "What has Dirk to do with us?"

She had thought the old-fashioned bathroom huge until Adam stretched tall, squaring his broad shoulders, thrusting out his jaw much as his ancestors must have done prior to combat. Expecting a quick thrust of words, she was disconcerted by his weary, almost sad tone.

"According to Harris you came here just for kicks. I turned up in your life at a time when the endless round of social activity was beginning to pall. You were restless, seeking diversion, any escape from the boring daily round, and an interval with a wild man of the mountains titillated your jaded appetite. He also implied that our marriage was unnecessary as you would have come anyway—he's unaware, of course, that you were given no other choice once your father and I

began exerting pressure. You must have deplored my staid insistence upon observing the proprieties, you must already have been regretting our marriage when Beattie appeared on the scene to emphasise how much you were pining for your own environment. That night I surprised the pair of you in a clinch," he sounded suddenly strangled, "I had great difficulty keeping my hands off him!"

He looked down, flexing his fingers, bewildered still by the strength of an emotion which even in retrospect could turn a normally evenly-balanced mind towards thoughts of violence. With a snap of a trap his fists clenched shut.

"I felt for the first time in my life the urge of primitive man to defend what is his," he cast her a savagely resentful look. "You see, even in that short space of time I had begun to regard you as one of my possessions—my wife, one whom no other man should dare to touch, my woman who ought not to dare to allow such an intimacy!"

Tammy had listened in shaken silence, but at the last censorious thrust she drew back, too sore at heart to even register the pain of her injured ankle.

"You believed that of me?" she choked. "You judged me on the evidence of a vindictive man and your own twisted version of what was actually a perfectly innocent episode?"

"Not just that!" he hissed. "Doesn't the fact that you intend to leave give credence to Harris's accusations? I brought you here against my better judgement. You were willing to come, yet now you insist upon going even though I've told you you can stay!"

Hot bitter words ended as a gurgle in her throat. She pushed past him into the bedroom, too hurt to even begin to try to explain the degradation she had felt at his grudging admission that he needed her

merely to assuage his physical hunger. Pain jabbed her ankle as she ran to pull a suitcase from out of a cupboard, a pain which at any other time would have felt agonizing but which barely registered through a red mist of anger and shame.

"You're not leaving!" The imperious command scythed across her shoulder. Tammy swung round, and armoured with pride and fury jumped into the fray.

"I'm going home, Adam Fox! Back to love and respect, back to someone who believes in me, who'll take my word before any other—qualities I'll never find here!" Beautiful in her fury, she fixed him in the full glare of her attacking eyes. "So sorry I didn't swoon with gratitude when you told me I could stay, but even I, cheap, worthless, and low on morals, ask more of a husband than grudging condescension! I spoiled you, Baron Fox! When I first came here I was so besotted I couldn't see that behind your austere facade lay a hollow void where your heart should be. I prostrated myself at your feet, pampered your every whim, accepted every insult, every rebuff, hoping that in time, you might begin to return a little of the love I showered upon you. But now I've had enough—enough of you, enough of Fox Hall, enough of the whole feudal community that considers Baron Fox is God, that Baron Fox's word is law! Stay in your guarded keep, remain entrenched behind granite walls that ordinary warm, human feelings can't penetrate! Take an ice maiden for your bride and live happily ever after in your tomb of restrained emotion! Pamela will never stir within you a frenzy of passion or anger, but then that should suit you fine, for what better partner than a lukewarm woman for a man of stone!"

Her last jab found its mark. Adam's arrogant head snapped back as if from a blow. His responding thrust was sharp, angry and decisive. Hard hands descended to manacle her shoulders with a grip primitive in its violence. A light she had never seen before appeared in his eyes—blazing hot, frighteningly blue. Preliminary words were

deemed unnecessary; she was jerked against his hard chest, her startled lips captured by a cruel, angry mouth intent upon revenge.

It began as a kiss of punishment containing all the stored-up frustrations of a strong-minded man resentful of his physical weaknesses, a crushing, stabbing, ravishing kiss that ought to have annihilated all emotions but which developed instead into a storming stampeding of the senses. Neither of them noted the actual moment of change; one second they were locked in a kiss .of hate, the next they were sharing a tempest of passion, clinging together like castaways on a turbulent sea. They kissed and clung and kissed again, hungry for contact, animosity forgotten as they were, carried along on a tide of enchanting discovery.

Tammy put everything of her youthful, loving heart into returning Adam's kisses, thrilling to a newly-discovered mastery, amazed and bemused by the knowledge that her softly murmured endearments had the power to turn the proud, dominating Baron into a pleading, supplicating lover. She would have taken little convincing that the interlude was a dream manufactured by her imagination, brought about by hours of yearning for just such a happening. But then as his questing lips stroked along the tender curve of her shoulder his shaken voice pleaded,

"I adore you, my beautiful, tantalizing little witch! Oh, lord, I love you so much! Don't ever leave me, Tammy, let me hear you say that you'll stay!"

She crumpled against him, tears of joy and disbelief welling into her eyes. "I'll never leave you, my darling, not now that I know you love me. If only you knew how much I've ached to hear those words! I waited, hoped, prayed, but the admission never came—until now..."

Then suddenly it was she who was unsure, she who questioned, who tried to be cool and level-headed. "Are you certain, Adam? Could this

be mere momentary madness on your part? I know I attract you physically, but that's not enough—you can't love and despise a person at one and the same time. What if later, when you're less aroused, you regret words spoken in the heat of passion?"

Tenderly he drew her head against his shoulder, pulling a rein on his urgency while he stroked her troubled face. "If what I feel for you is contempt, sweet love, then I also feel contemptuous of birds singing on a spring morning; of fluffy clouds sailing past towering peaks; of deep blue lakes nestling within valleys surrounded by sweeping green slopes; of the smooth blackness of a raven's wing; the cry of a curlew; the moving majesty of the sun slipping slowly behind granite crags tipping each jagged tip with liquid gold. , I feel the same humble gratitude for them as I do for you, my darling—is that assurance enough?"

It ought to have been; he was telling her that he loved her as much as his beloved home, as much as life itself, yet still a small part of her quivered, unhealed.

Burying her head deeper into his shoulder, she mumbled, "Yet you believed all those things Steve said about me."

His low reply was proof that he was troubled. "I wanted to believe them, Tammy. I tried so desperately hard to convince myself that all he said was true." Her hurt look caused him a wince of pain. "I knew," he continued slowly, "that I had no right to keep you here, so I kept looking for excuses to send you away. You see, I can't offer you anything to compare with the life you've been used to, none of the luxury, the soft living, and certainly none of the wealth. According to your father's standards I'm a poor man. Though prospects are brighter I can hold out no hope in the foreseeable future of ever being able to match his affluence. I can offer you nothing that you don't already possess. Pride tells me I have no right to ask you to remain my wife, the fact that I've done so is the measure of my love for you."

A great sigh heaved from the depths of her. She ought to have realized! Knowing the fierce pride of him, his inherited arrogance, his wish to give only what is best, she ought not to have been so blind!

"Oh, sweet, wonderful, proud Adam! Don't you know, dearest love, that only you can give me the thing I want more than anything else in the world?"

He looked puzzled. "What is this thing that you want ? If it's in my power to give then you shall certainly have it."

She clung close as an extra rib, but had to stand on tiptoe to whisper in his ear.

"If you please, Baron Fox," she pleaded, "I'd like three daughters and seven sons..