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ALL THE LONG SUMMER



Lucy Gillen

Harlequin Romances

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by LUCY GILLEN

The only complication in Isa's new job was that it brought her into the centre of the antagonism between her employer, Toby Carmichael, and his enemy, Chris Burrows.

Isa found both men attractive — but why couldn't they leave her out of their quarrels? And which one of them was telling the truth?



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CHAPTER ONE

Ia sat, nervous but controlled, on the very edge of the chair and tried not to listen to what was going on in the office behind the solid dark door the other side of the filing cabinet. Several times during the last fifteen minutes voices had been raised in there and had penetrated as far as the waiting-room, and each time Isa had involuntarily glanced up and met the interested gaze of the young man behind the desk in the corner, then hastily looked away again.

Isa was used to being looked at, but there was not only appreciation in the clerk's eyes but speculation as well, and she was uneasy about that. No girl who is a petite five feet two and possesses a better than average figure is surprised when men look at her, but somehow Isa disliked the implication behind the present scrutiny.

Her own long lashes hid eyes that were more violet than blue, and dark brown hair framed a small oval face, with a small and somewhat retrousse nose. Her mouth was full and soft and looked as if it smiled a lot, although at present it looked rather disconsolate.

She was trying not to listen to what was plainly quite a violent quarrel, for all it sounded a bit one-sided, and it was something of a shock to her to hear such a thing taking place in a respectable soli-

citor's office. Just as obviously the young man at the desk was trying to hear and not succeeding, a fact he conveyed by pulling a face when she caught his eye again.

A female voice was clearly audible, raised yet again and, although Isa could not make out the words, it was plain that the woman, whoever she was, was furiously angry. The man's voice was quieter but more dominant suddenly, persuasively deep and controlled, and did not so far sound angry. That voice, if the young man behind the desk was to be believed, belonged to Mr. Toby Carmichael himself, the man she was waiting to see.

Once more she inadvertently caught the young man's eye and saw that he was smiling, a curiously knowing smile that Isa instinctively disliked. "Won't be long now," he promised, and Isa wondered how he could be so certain.

Whatever he had based his supposition on, however, proved to be quite accurate, for sure enough only minutes later the door of the inner office opened and a woman came out. She was tall and dark and somewhere in her mid-thirties, Isa guessed, with long elegant legs and slim ankles set off by expensive shoes, and when she turned she enveloped Isa and the rest of the small room in a waft of expensive perfume.

It seemed out of character somehow for a woman who looked as she did to be appealing to anyone, but she was doing just that to the man who followed her out. Her expression was completely at

variance with the angry voice of a few minutes before, and yet there was no doubt it was the same woman.

"Toby," she said in a low, slightly sulky voice, "you *will* come, won't you?"

The man, as yet invisible to Isa because of the intervening cabinet, sounded more pacifying than reassuring, and Isa's curiosity took a fresh turn. Obviously the quarrel had been more concerned with intimate matters than professional ones, and that puzzled her. "I'll try, Sylvia," he said, one hand on the woman's silk-clad shoulder. "Now please will you go? I have to see someone and I'm late already!"

"Oh?" Sharp dark eyes registered Isa's presence at last, tucked away behind the filing cabinet, and the rather gaunt features hardened as she was subjected to a swift and critical appraisal.

The man came into view at last, looking down at Isa from above the cabinet, a glint of speculative amusement in his eyes. They were blue eyes,

deeply set, and they regarded her for several seconds before he spoke. "Miss McLean?" he asked, and Isa nodded.

Mr. Toby Carmichael wasn't in the least like she had visualised him to be. She had seen him as a fairly successful solicitor, since he had his own chambers, and she had expected him to be older, quite a bit older in fact, and certainly much more staid than he appeared to be. Of course, her knowledge of solicitors was strictly limited to old Mr. Greylord who had administered her aunt's estate,

but, somehow he had fitted the picture of family solicitor perfectly.

Judging by what she could see of him at the moment Toby Carmichael was no more than thirty-four or five years old, and those glitteringly amused eyes regarding her from above the filing cabinet did nothing to suggest that their owner was staid—rather the reverse, she suspected.

The woman who had come out of the office with him gave Isa no time to identify herself more fully, nor did she leave as she was so obviously expected to do. Instead she looked down at Isa with a definite glint of suspicion in her eyes and her head held back so that she looked at her down the length of her nose. It was a brief, critical appraisal and suggested that Isa's immediate departure would be preferred. Then she turned again to Toby Carmichael and raised an elegant brow.

"Not a new secretary, surely, darling," she said in a low and distinctively husky voice. "You still have clear old Miss Clayton." She looked across to where the door of another small office stood open, its desk deserted, and frowned. "Where *is* Miss Clayton?" she asked suspiciously.

"Having a day off!" The answer was brief and curt, and Isa suspected that Mr. Toby Carmichael was not the most patient of men. "Now will you please leave, Sylvia," he insisted quietly but firmly. "I have an appointment!" He completely ignored what could have been another protest by his visitor and walked around the cabinet to where Isa sat small and uncertain on her chair, and extended one

hand in invitation. "Will you come in now, Miss McLean?"

Isa's legs felt suddenly and strangely weak as she got to her feet, and she tried hard to forget that this job was her first ever, and that this man was not at all as she had expected her first employer -to be, always supposing he found her suitable, of course.

She wished suddenly that she had put on something a little more impressive than the gold-coloured trichel suit she had felt so right in at first. And her low-heeled brown shoes would have impressed the man she had expected to see, but this man would probably have quite a different taste in lady's companions.

Someone like old Mr. Greylord would have been comfortingly paternal and understanding, but Mr. Toby Carmichael was much too boldly self-confident, and there was something about him that she found quite disturbing.

It did nothing for her self-confidence either to know that the dark woman was watching with suspicious eyes as they walked into Toby Carmichael's private office, and Isa prayed that reaction would not cause another outburst like the one she had heard earlier. The faint murmur of protest she made when he carefully and firmly closed the door on her was completely ignored, and Isa found the gesture almost ruthless in its deliberation. In fact she even felt briefly sorry for the woman, whoever she might be, for there was no doubt that the young man in the outer office had not only witnessed but also enjoyed her humiliation.

Fingers rapped briefly and impatiently on the heavy wooden door, but he ignored it and followed *Isa across* the big, darkly luxurious office. There followed a faint murmur of voices, then silence, and Isa thought there was a trace of a smile on Toby Carmichael's mouth as he indicated a chair set one side of a large highly polished desk.

"Please sit down!" he invited, and Isa slid gingerly on to the polished leather seat, curiosity and nervousness mingled in the look that followed him as he walked round the desk and stood before the tall, narrow window for a moment with his back to her.

Taking advantage of his preoccupation, Isa took the opportunity to study him. He stood with his hands turned backwards on his hips, pushing his jacket out behind him, while one foot tapped softly on the bare boards that bordered the carpet, apparently too concerned with something else for the moment to give her his attention.

He was taller than she had expected, unlike old Mr. Greylord who was short and stocky and given to wearing rather shabby tweed suits that did not fit him very well. This man was slim, with lean hips and a narrow waist, but broad-shouldered, and his tailoring was excellent and obviously expensive.

He wore a dark grey suit and a white shirt, both of which fitted him to perfection, and the tie she could just see from where she sat looked like pure silk and was conservatively dark, as his profession demanded.

His hair was darker than her own and worn fairly

short, but it looked thick and healthily glossy where it swept back from a broad forehead. His feet were planted slightly apart in a posture that suggested not only self-confidence but arrogance, which was something she had not even thought of, and she realised she would have to do some serious rethinking on the subject of solicitors.

He turned from the window suddenly and caught her unawares, still studying him, and again she caught that glint of laughter in his eyes, as if her discomfiture amused him. For several nerve-shattering seconds he said nothing, but regarded her steadily, then he nodded, as if he had suddenly made up his mind, and came and stood the other side of the desk.

"Ali, yes, Miss McLean," he said, as if he had only just remembered she was there, and she felt her colour rise when she was suddenly raked again with that arrogant and speculative gaze. "Miss Isabella Mary McLean, right?"

"Yes, that's right, Mr. Carmichael."

Her letter of application was on the desk in front of him, she noticed, and she felt herself shivering with nerves as he glanced down at it briefly without picking it up. She was at a disadvantage too because the light from the window fell on her own features and left his in partial shadow. "You're a trained nurse?" he asked, and Isa shook her head, her stomach curling in dismay as she anticipated the first obstacle. Her letter told him she was untrained, and she saw the question simply as a possible excuse for turning her down.

"No, I'm not actually trained," she said, licking her lips anxiously. "I told you in my letter, Mr. Carmichael, I—"

"Oh yes!" He picked up the letter at last and read it through briefly, then sat himself behind the desk, leaning back in his chair and looking at her from the shadow of half lowered lids, a trace of amusement still lingering round his mouth, or so it seemed to Isa. "Have you done this sort of thing before—professionally, I mean?"

Isa hesitated, finding it difficult to confess that her sole experience had been in looking after Aunt Carrie for years. If only he would simply read her letter through he would have all the same information he was now asking for verbally. "I looked after my aunt for five and a half years," she explained, her tongue again flicking nervously over her lips as she felt his eyes on her. "She wasn't really ill, but she wanted company and a little taking care of. Your—your advert didn't say a trained nurse was required."

"It doesn't call for a trained nurse," he agreed quietly, his chin resting on steepled fingers. "But—" Broad shoulders shrugged expressively. "You look a bit young to take on the burden of an old lady."

"I'm twenty-three," Isa assured him, wishing once again that she could do something about her deceptively juvenile looks. "And I'm quite used to the work, Mr. Carmichael."

He regarded her steadily for another moment or two, then he smiled, a smile that showed in his eyes and crinkled them at their corners in the most

intriguing way. "You really want this job, don't you?" he asked, and Isa flushed at the idea of having been so easily read.

"I—I haven't done anything since my aunt died," she said cautiously. "And I have—I mean, I want to go on with the same kind of work if I can."

"You have to work?" The question was quietly put, but she felt herself resent it, probably quite unreasonably. Ever since her father died and left her and her mother much worse off than they realised, she had been sensitive about money.

Aunt Carrie had taken them into her home, she was Isa's great-aunt in fact, but the old lady had expected plenty in return for her charity and they had never been allowed to forget it. Isa's mother had hated it and had left the house as soon as an offer of marriage enabled her to be free of her aunt, leaving Isa behind to cope with the old lady as best she could. In fact she had got on quite well with Aunt Carrie, despite her difficult character, but Aunt Carrie too had died penniless and since Isa had to work, she could only try and do the only thing she knew.

"Yes," she said in a small clear voice that carried a hint of defiance, "I have to work, Mr. Carmichael."

"And you like working with elderly people?" Again she nodded, unwilling to confess that it was all she could do. "Even if they're not the sweetest disposition in the world?"

Immediately she recalled Aunt Carrie's wrinkled, petulant face and sighed inwardly. "I'm used to a

rather trying old lady." she admitted, and again that swift glimmer of amusement showed in his eyes.

"My grandmother is rather more autocratic than trying," he told her frankly. "And I'm not at all sure she wouldn't eat a little thing like you for breakfast, but if you're prepared to risk it—" An eloquent shrug completed the sentence and for a moment Isa stared at him unbelievably.

"You—you mean I've got the job?" she asked breathlessly.

"If you want it!"

"Oh, I do!" She immediately regretted her rather naive enthusiasm, especially when she saw how it amused him.

"Can you start right away?" he asked, and Isa nodded, still too stunned to speak. She had not looked forward to staying with Mrs. Garfield very long, for her first choice of a landlady had proved even more of an ogre than Aunt Carrie had ever been and Isa was frankly scared of her. "You know you will be living in?"

Again she nodded. "Yes, Mr. Carmichael," she said. "I expected that."

The blue eyes slid over her in a slow, compelling scrutiny that was both eloquent and disturbing, then he smiled. "And you don't mind?" he asked quietly.

"No, of course not, I expected it." It was difficult to keep her voice steady in the circumstances and she wondered why he had thought fit to press the question of her living in—there was surely no alternative if she was to care for an old lady and

act as her companion.

He was nodding his head, one finger touching his mouth as if to hide the hint of smile there. "I live with my grandmother," he informed her softly, and was obviously waiting for some reaction from her.

For a moment Isa coped with a sudden and unexpected increase in her heartbeat, then she swallowed hard and tried to appear as if it was no surprise at all. "I didn't know that," she said in as cool a voice as she could summon.

"And?" One dark brow flicked upwards and **he** was watching her closely as she replied.

It was something she had not anticipated and **for** the moment it had surprised her, but it was quite feasible that he shared his grandmother's home since he had taken on the responsibility of finding her a companion, and it need make little difference to her own position.

He was almost bound to be out for most of the day, and probably most evenings too, unless she had misjudged his character. That sultry, dark-haired woman with whom he had been quarrelling was an indication of the kind of life he led, she thought, and for a moment envied him the kind of freedom she had never had herself.

"I'd still like to work for your grandmother, Mr. Carmichael," she said with a quiet confidence she was far from feeling.

Her answer seemed to satisfy him, for he nodded his head firmly, then got up from the desk again and stood with his hands on the back of the chair, looking across at her for a moment before he spoke,

a scrutiny that Isa found infinitely disturbing. Then he glanced at his wristwatch and nodded. "I have one more appointment this afternoon," he told her. "If you'd like to wait in the outer office or look around the town for an hour, I can run you out to Trent House when I finish for the day—O.K.?"

Isa licked her lips anxiously. "Yes, thank you."

"Better still," he went on, "we can drive over and get your things, then go straight out to the house. You've told your landlady you'll be leaving, haven't you?"

"Well—no," Isa said, anxious not to put obstacles in the way but worried about Mrs. Garfield's reactions to seeing her new lodger moving out so soon, without even a week's rent due. "I—I didn't expect to move so soon, and Mrs. Garfield—" She bit her lip when she thought of Mrs. Garfield's opinion of self-confident young solicitors who bowled up and whisked away her paying guests. "Mrs. Garfield—"

"Has already got you firmly under her thumb," Toby Carmichael guessed with a hint of derision in his smile. "Well, you leave Mrs. Whateverhername is to me, Miss McLean. We'll pick up your things first, then drive out to Trent House, O.K.?"

"Yes, Mr. Carmichael, if you think—"

"I think," he assured her briskly. "Now, if you'll go and amuse yourself for an hour or so and be back here at, say—five-fifteen, hmm?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Feeling as she was moving in a dream, Isa got up and walked across the office with her legs weak and trembly and a curious sense of unreality making her

eyes wide and unseeing. She was not normally a meek and pliable character, although Aunt Carrie had done her best to quell her natural rebelliousness over the years, but everything had happened so quickly and with such unexpected ease that she had difficulty in grasping the fact that it had happened at all.

"Oh, Miss McLean!" She turned again swiftly and found him still standing behind his desk, his tall figure outlined against the window and half blocking the light from it. The door was open behind her and she knew quite well that the inquisitive young man at the desk in the outer office would be listening to every word, but she hesitated to go back and close the door again. "I hope your Mrs. Whoever is a lot more of a tyrant than my grandmother," Toby Carmichael told her with a smile, "or you're going to be sunk without trace when Grandmama gets her teeth into your

Isa felt those curious eyes watching her from the outer office, sensed the surprise and probably amusement too, and flushed a bright, betraying pink as she looked at her new employer with eyes that were suddenly bright and resentful. "I can cope perfectly well, Mr. Carmichael, thank you," she told him in a voice that shook only a little. "You don't even have to bother picking up my things, I can get a taxi while I'm waiting for you."

For a moment he did not answer, then he shook his head and laughed, a soft, deep sound that brought more colour to her cheeks. "O.K.," he said. "You fight your own dragons, Miss McLean, if

that's the way you want it, but have the taxi bring you back here, don't go straight out to the house, there's no need to go to all that expense just to prove your independence !"

The reference to her financial state, however well meant, she found mean and uncalled-for, but it was true and there was no use denying it. She stuck out her chin and looked at him steadily. "If you prefer it that way, Mr. Carmichael," she said.

"I do," he said quietly. "And if you're not back here by five-fifteen I'll come and pick up the pieces!"

Stiff-backed and with her chin in the air, Isa walked across to the door, closing it without turning round again and making sure she did not slam it hard as she felt like doing. As an interview the last few minutes could hardly have been more eventful or less reassuring, but she had the job she had come for, that was the most important thing.

It was so much more than she had anticipated, and as she went down the narrow dark staircase to the street again she laughed suddenly and hugged herself in sudden excitement. Mr. Toby Carmichael aside, she looked forward to her first real job, and no old lady could possibly be more demanding or critical than Aunt Carrie had been.

Mrs. Garfield, as Isa expected, was scathing in her comments on guests who stayed only a day or two and then packed up and moved out in what Mrs. Garfield called 'highly suspicious circumstances'. She was only thankful that she had not followed

Toby Carmichael's suggestion and let him bring her to fetch her things, or heaven knew what interpretation Mrs. Garfield would have put on that.

She had driven in the taxi back to his chambers and sat in that same small waiting-room again until he came and found her just after half past five. The young man in the corner had departed promptly at five-fifteen and she had sat in solitary state for the last fifteen minutes, then Toby Carmichael came out of his office in a rush, smiling but unapologetic.

Driving along with him in a sleek black sports car that was more suitable for Monte Carlo than the quiet lanes of Surrey, some time later, Isa glanced at him from the corners of her eyes. In the deepness of the evening sunlight his features looked even more dark and she noticed with some surprise that he had eyelashes that would have been the envy of many women.

The strong chin was suggestive of stubbornness as well as arrogance, and there was a hint of sensuality in the lower lip that probably explained both anger and appeal of his female visitor. He would not be an easy man to know or to understand, but—She bit her lip hastily when he turned his head suddenly and cocked a curious brow.

"You're very quiet, Miss McLean," he said in that cool, quiet voice. "Are you always so reticent?"

"Not always," Isa said, taken by surprise and feeling quite unaccountably guilty.

"You're nervous," he guessed, and laughed softly as if he rather liked the idea, a suggestion of cruelty

that Isa resented and looked at him reproachfully.

"I'm nervous," she agreed in a small voice, "because this is my first job, Mr. Carmichael, and I don't find the prospect exactly reassuring."

"Your first job?" He glanced at her briefly over one shoulder and she wondered if he was going to have second thoughts about employing her, although it was a little late now. "I didn't realise that." He pulled a face, then shrugged, his long hands guiding the car expertly round 'another corner. "I should have realised, of course," he said. "You're too young to have done anything else if you nursed your aunt for five and a half years."

"I'm quite capable," Isa assured him hastily, lest he should consider turning back and dumping her on Mrs. Garfield's inhospitable doorstep. "Even Aunt Carrie had no complaints about the way I looked after her."

"Well, I won't guarantee that Grandmama will be as satisfied," he told her with a smile. "But if you're ready to take it on then you deserve your salary."

Her salary, the salary mentioned in her letter he had sent to her, was quite beyond anything she had expected and she still did not quite believe it could be true. It had not been mentioned at the interview, and she found it difficult to bring up the subject now, but she must have the right figure, judging by his remark

"I—I don't know your—my employer's name," she ventured, and he smiled at her again over his shoulder.

"I'm your employer," he informed her. "Grand-

mama's got through five housekeepers in the past two years and I want someone to give their whole time to her and keep her from upsetting Mrs. Grayle, the current one. She'll probably have you on the hop from morning till night, but if you can stand the pace you might even get to like the old darling!"

"I think I might," Isa agreed, and genuinely believed it.

"Here we are!" He turned the car into a long straight drive that ran between two rows of tall beeches and gave glimpses of green parkland spread out on both sides seemingly endlessly.

It was a huge acreage and for the first time Isa began to wonder whether Toby Carmichael was entirely dependent upon his fees as a solicitor. The house when it came into view was beautifully elegant and graceful in the best Georgian manner and must surely be worth far more than any young solicitor could afford.

"This—this is it?" she asked cautiously, and he nodded.

"This, as they say, is it." He glanced at her again over his shoulder and one dark brow questioned her opinion. "Do you like it?" he asked, as if her opinion mattered.

"It's beautiful!" Her response was unhesitating, and he smiled.

"We like it!"

They drew up in front of a slim-columned portico and barely had the car stopped before a woman came out of the front door, her plain face breaking

into a half smile when she saw Toby Carmichael. "I'm glad you're here, Mr. Carmichael," she told him, quietly, so that Isa was not supposed to hear. "Madame's been asking for you and I had a job to convince her that you hadn't come home yet."

"Leave it to me!" He seemed unperturbed by the news and turned to Isa, putting the fingers of one long hand under her arm and drawing her to the four wide steps that led to the front door. "Come on, Miss McLean, you might as well plunge in at the deep end!"

Isa caught the expression on the woman's face as she turned to follow him, and her heart was hammering fast at her side as she climbed the steps beside him. Whatever she had let herself in for would soon become apparent, if she had read the signs correctly.

She had little time to appreciate the cool elegance of the hall they walked into, only to register its lush deep carpet and the slender gilt furniture that enhanced its elegance. Toby Carmichael opened a door at the far end and led her into a big sunny room that opened on to a garden, a beautiful bright room where a tall straight figure sat alone, down near the open windows.

It was like something from a dream as far as Isa was concerned and she stared as she walked with her employer down its length towards the solitary occupant. Paintings on the walls had a faintly familiar look about them and she realised that she had seen copies of them in art shops, only these would undoubtedly be the originals, she had no doubt at all.

The figure in the armchair turned as they approached and Isa felt the hard scrutiny of a pair of bright dark eyes. The features were strong and almost more masculine than feminine, although she must once have been a very handsome woman, and the body tall and thin in a dark red silk dress that must surely have been conceived in a Paris work-room.

Toby Carmichael went alone the last few feet and bent his head to kiss the stern face gently. "Hello, you old curmudgeon," he said affectionately. "Have you been playing up poor Grayle again? You know I have to go down on my knees to keep a house-keeper, darling, why do you make life so difficult for me?"

"The woman's a fool!" his grandmother retorted, and again fixed her shrewd bright gaze on Isa. "Who's this? Not one of your girl-friends?"

He straightened up and looked over his shoulder at Isa who tried hard to control the sudden flush of colour in her face at the blunt question, "Miss McLean is going to look after you, darling," he told the old lady with a smile. "Miss Isabella McLean is going to be your companion, and if you don't treat her right you'll have to answer to me!" He reached out with one hand and drew Isa close to the chair where the old lady sat, his eyes watching her closely, watching to see if she shrank from the meeting, Isa guessed ruefully, and determinedly faced the old lady with a smile. "Miss McLean, this is my grandmother, Lady Carmichael."

The title was unexpected, and so was the sudden

look of gentleness that came over the lined face and made it look somehow younger. She stretched out a hand and Isa came closer, her heart thudding anxiously against her ribs as she bore the scrutiny of two pairs of eyes.

"You brought a child like this to cope with an old woman like me?" Lady Carmichael asked. "How could you, Toby?"

Her reproach seemed neither to worry him nor surprise him, and he smiled at Isa, one eyelid lowered briefly in a broad wink that was probably meant to reassure her. "I thought you might think twice about bullying anyone so small and sweet," he told his grandmother blandly, while Isa hastily looked down at the old lady rather than at him. "Well?" he asked after a second's silence, during which Lady Carmichael studied her shrewdly. "Do I leave her here with you or take her back to the cold, cold world and let her find some other elderly lady to cosset?"

"You leave her here, of course," Lady Carmichael told him with certainty. She looked up at Isa again and frowned. "Are you used to putting up with an old woman's bad temper, child?" she asked, and Isa smiled warily,

"I looked after my aunt for five and a half years, Lady Carmichael," she said in as steady a voice as she could manage, "I'd—I'd like to stay if you'll let me."

"Good!" The old lady nodded as if well satisfied. "I'm glad you've got the spunk to try at least!"

The bright dark eyes looked at her steadily for a

moment and Isa found herself seeing something other than harshness and bad temper in the wrinkled face. There was a gentleness too that she had glimpsed at briefly in those first few minutes, and surely anyone was better than Mrs. Garfield and her interminable regulations. Also, of course, when she really faced the facts--she had very little choice, her boats were burned, and there was no going back.

CHAPTER TWO

AFTER four days at Trent House Isa was finding it much less awesome than she had feared. Lady, Carmichael was short-tempered and could be unbelievably difficult at times, but she could also show a softer, gentler side to her nature that Isa found quite endearing. The old lady's eyesight was failing and she liked Isa to read to her, but on the whole she required very little physical help.

She found walking rather difficult at times because of arthritis, but she used a stick to assist her as well as Isa's ever ready arm, and could on occasion manage alone. She had informed Isa at the outset that she was ninety-seven years old and meant to reach one hundred, an achievement she would no doubt accomplish if it depended on mere strength of 'Will.

She plainly adored her grandson, despite their frequent verbal exchanges, and so far as Isa could gather the old lady had been responsible for his upbringing. No reference had been made so far of his parents, so she assumed that they were either dead or had parted during his childhood.

The afternoon was bright and sunny and Isa had read two whole chapters of a crime novel to the old lady; now she sat on the window, seat looking out at

the gardens and the lawns as they stretched, lush and green, down to the river. The old lady was asleep in her chair and Isa wished she could take advantage of the fact and go for a walk in the sunshine, but years with Aunt Carrie had taught her that sometimes old ladies are not always as fast asleep as they appear to be. If she attempted to steal away for a few moments Lady Carmichael would no doubt wake up and demand to know where she was going.

In sleep the long thin hands had a frail, gentle look and the features too relaxed into a softness they rarely attained in consciousness. She was, Isa had decided from her first day, much better to work for than poor Aunt Carrie had been. Aunt Carrie had seen her autocracy as strength, whereas Lady Carmichael was wise enough to realise that gentleness could have its own strength.

Some small unconscious movement of hers must have woken the old lady, for she stirred briefly and opened her eyes, then almost immediately closed them again. -"Why don't you go out into the sunshine for a bit?" she asked, *and* Isa blinked at *her*, momentarily startled.

"I'm all right, Lady Carmichael," she said. "Really I—"

"You're as pale as cream," the old lady retorted swiftly, still without opening her eyes. "You need more sunshine and fresh air—it isn't good for a young girl to spend all her time indoors. In the four days you've been here you've never left the house!"

Isa shook her head, startled by the new experience.

Such a thing would never have occurred to Aunt Carrie and she was unused to coping with such thoughtfulness, however forcefully put. "I really don't mind staying with you, Lady Carmichael," she assured her, and smiled when the old lady opened her bright, shrewd eyes at last and frowned at her.

"Nonsense, child!" she said briskly. "It isn't natural for you not to want to go out. If you don't go out you'll stay pale and pasty all your life, and no man likes that!"

The frank opinion startled her further and Isa stared. "But, Lady Carmichael," she objected, "I don't—"

"You don't even go anywhere in the evenings," the old lady went on indomitably. "A young girl like you should be dancing and going to theatres, not sitting in **her** room reading or watching television with an old woman!" The shrewd eyes fixed themselves on her steadily. "If you don't like going anywhere alone or if you haven't a young man, then I'll instruct Toby to take you somewhere!"

"Oh *no*, my lady!" Isa gazed at her in horror. her face warmly pink when she thought what Toby Carmichael's reaction would be to such a direction.

"Then at least take yourself off for a walk while the sun lasts," Lady Carmichael commanded relentlessly. "I hate pale-faced little creatures about me—and so does my grandson!"

Why she should consider Toby's opinion was of any consequence to her, Isa did not stop to wonder; she got to her feet, only too anxious to have her wish to be out into the sunshine made a reality. She

looked at the old lady curiously for a moment, a half smile on her lips, for she had little doubt that the threat to delegate Toby as her escort was quite seriously meant.

"I hope you *won't* think of saying anything to Mr. Carmichael about taking me—" she began, and a thin hand waved the suggestion aside impatiently.

"I won't, I won't, you silly child!" Lady Carmichael said. "Now off with you for a walk or whatever it is you want to do!"

"I think I'll walk as far as the river," Isa decided, looking at her wristwatch. "It looks nice down there, and I won't be very long, Lady Carmichael—I'll be back in plenty of time for dinner."

"Be as long as you like," the old lady told her grandly. "I shan't rim away!"

It was lovely walking on the cool green turf down to the river and Isa revelled in the sense of freedom it gave her. Aunt Carrie had given her little free time and had always demanded to know where she went and with whom— -it would take time to adjust to the idea of being able to do as she liked with her free time.

She had never walked as far as the river before, although she had caught glimpses of it from her bedroom window, glinting in the sun, beyond the fringe of trees that lined its banks. There were rose gardens and formal flower beds near the house, but after a while a curving spinney of trees neatly dissected the formal from the natural and from there on open, sweeping parkland ran smoothly as far as

the river, sloping gently downwards and giving a vista of distant countryside, hazy in the summer sunlight.

To Isa, town born and bred, it was unbelievably beautiful, and she felt a sudden surge of incredible happiness and excitement as she looked up at the clear blue of the sky, only lightly flecked with cottonwool clouds, and without quite knowing what prompted her, she started to run.

Down the gentle slope, her feet seeming almost not to touch the ground and a smile of sheer pleasure on her face when the wind she created lifted her hair and tossed it out behind her. Her momentum took her without stopping right to the bottom of the incline and into the fringe of trees that bordered the river.

Out of breath and going too fast to stop of her own accord, she caught at one of the trees as she passed and brought herself to a standstill. But the rough bark was less harmless than she had anticipated and she cried out, putting her stinging palm instinctively to her mouth.

"Are you hurt?"

The voice came from immediately behind her and Isa swung round swiftly, her eyes wide and startled, breathing heavily after the unaccustomed exertion, shaking her head to deny any injury. A man stood a few feet behind her, looking at her enquiringly, and impulsively she smiled.

"No, I'm not hurt," she said. "Just scratched." She extended her left hand to show the grazed palm and smiled again ruefully. "It was my own fault for

being such an idiot—I was going so fast **I** couldn't stop!"

"Let me see." He came forward, a rather gaunt figure of medium height dressed in shabby grey trousers with the legs tucked into short boots, and a checked shirt open at the neck and with the sleeves rolled up above the elbows. He took her hand in his and looked at the palm for a second before letting it go again and shaking his head. "Nothing serious," he said, and looked at her again, his gaze curious. "Do you know this is private land?" he asked with a faint smile. "I don't mind for myself, but my employer—"

"Oh, but I work for Mr, Carmichael too," Isa informed him hastily. "That is, I'm Lady Carmichael's companion."

"Oh, **I** see!" He was obviously embarrassed at having taken her for a trespasser, for he ran one hand through his light brown hair nervously, smiling an apology. "I'm sorry," he said, "**I** didn't know her ladyship had a companion."

Anxious to reassure him, Isa smiled. "There's no reason why you should" she told him. "I've only been here for four days and I've scarcely left the house in that time." She was curious about him and suspected he was about her too, so she extended her right hand and smiled. "I'm Isa McLean," she said.

It was obvious that he was favourably impressed, for his eyes showed a definite glow of appreciation, though a much more restrained appreciation than Toby Carmichael's bold appraisal. He took her hand in a firm grasp and shook it briefly, but retained his

hold for rather longer than was necessary. "Chris Burrows," he said. "I'm her ladyship's gamekeeper."

"Oh !" His identity came as something of a surprise to Isa in two ways. For one thing it hadn't occurred to her that the estate employed a gamekeeper, and for another he spoke as if his employer was Lady Carmichael, not Toby, and that confused her. "I didn't know there was a gamekeeper," she confessed. "And I didn't know—I mean, I thought Mr. Carmichael was the owner of the estate. I only assumed it, of course," she added hastily, and Chris Burrows' gauntly handsome face grimaced bitterly.

"So he is in law," he said, his opinion of the situation in no doubt. "Her ladyship made it over to him some years ago now, but I still don't see him as my boss."

see. ”

Isa thought she did see, all too clearly. It was obvious that there was bitterness and resentment between the man beside her and Toby Carmichael, although she could not imagine why. Their life styles must surely be worlds apart, and to be fair, Toby was no more autocratic than his grandmother, so there must be some other reason behind it. Meanwhile, apart from his obvious dislike of Toby Carmichael, she found Chris Burrows pleasant enough, and he was quite evidently anxious to strike up an acquaintance.

He was smiling again, seeking to restore a lighter atmosphere, and he leaned with one hand against a tall oak beside him, looking at her with frank ap-

proval. "I hope you're going to like it here," he said. "I'd hate to think of you going away before I have a chance to get to know you."

Isa laughed, her former lightheartedness restored. "I don't **think** I'll do that," she told him. "I like Lady Carmichael very much, and I'm sure I'll be quite happy with her."

"I hope so!" The rather earnest grey eyes looked at her hopefully for a moment, then down at the shabby boots he wore, and he kicked up fallen leaves into a damp pile at his feet. "I've got a little cottage just along here," he said, pointing along the river bank to his right. "Any time you feel like visiting, you'll be welcome."

"Thank you, Mr. Burrows, keep it in mind." Isa did not see herself having very much time to spare for visiting, but she would not be averse to paying a call when she was free, providing there was a Mrs. Burrows who was agreeable too. She looked up at him enquiringly, trying to discover if there was. "Does your wife work at the house too?" she asked, and he looked momentarily startled.

"I'm not married," he said after a moment's hesitation, then pulled a face. "I suppose that makes a difference, doesn't it?" he asked. "I honestly hadn't thought about that when I suggested you come to the cottage, Miss McLean, I'm sorry."

"Oh, please don't apologise !" She smiled reassuringly, touched by his genuine concern not to be misunderstood. "I assure you I didn't automatically suspect the worst !"

She had tried to dismiss it lightly, but a hint of

hardness showed for a moment in his eyes and he shook his head. "You might not," he told her, "but *Mr. Carmichael* would, and he'd be down on me like a ton of bricks if he thought I was—well, leading you into anything."

Isa felt the warmth of colour in her cheeks and was ready to deny any likelihood of Toby Carmichael even being interested enough to object, but somehow, at the back of her mind, she thought Chris Burrows could possibly be right. "I—I don't quite see that it concerns *Mr. Carmichael* how I spend my own time," she said, "but if you think he'd object—"

"He would," Chris Burrows insisted bitterly. "Our employer always judges others by his own standards and condemns accordingly!"

Considering they had met only a few minutes ago, Isa felt that the conversation was getting much too personal and too involved, and she sought ways of bringing things round to less touchy subjects than Toby Carmichael and his ethics. "I really haven't here long enough to comment on anything," she told him, and looked beyond him to the river glistening in the sunlight, becoming aware for the first time of how much cooler it was here under the trees. "There seems to be an awful lot to explore," she said with a laugh. "I shan't need to leave the estate to get in all the walks I want."

Seemingly as ready to abandon the subject of Toby Carmichael as she was herself, Chris Burrows nodded. "It's a lovely place," he agreed, and as if by mutual consent, they walked through the trees

to the river bank and stood for a moment or two looking down at the deep, swift flowing water. Muddy brown below and a dark, greenish grey nearer the banks, it had a fascination of its own. Then he turned his head and looked at her for a moment, his eyes thoughtful and steady. "You fit in here," he said quietly. "You belong somehow; I hope you'll be happy here."

"Oh, I'm sure I shall be !" Isa said, her eyes held by the swift, smooth flow of the water.

The tips of his fingers touched her arm lightly and he nodded his head in the direction of a cluster of willows about a hundred yards to their left, the tips of their thick branches dipping into the running water, drawn into shiveringly graceful bows by its movement.

"Shall we walk along a little way?" he suggested, and Isa nodded. Lady Carmichael had said there was no need for her to hurry back, and she found the idea of strolling along the river bank with Chris Burrows quite pleasurable.

It seemed nothing like two hours since she had left Lady Carmichael, but a glance at her wristwatch confirmed that it was and Isa's heart gave a sudden leap of panic. By now not only would Lady Carmichael be wondering where she was, but what was more important, her grandson would very soon be home, if he wasn't already there, and he would surely not take kindly to the idea of Isa going off for more than two hours and leaving the old lady alone.

She had discovered that Chris Burrows was very easy to talk to and that they had an interest in wild birds in common, so that the time had simply fled as they sat there on the river bank and talked. Now, she realised ruefully, she would have to take the consequences for her forgetfulness.

She got hastily to her feet, assisted by Chris Burrows' willing hands, and brushed the dried grass from her dress in careless haste, her teeth biting into her lower lip as she mentally sifted through explanations she could make,

"Doesn't her ladyship know you're out?" Chris Burrows asked, and Isa nodded.

"Oh yes, it was her suggestion that I came, but I didn't mean to be so long. She's bound to be wondering where on earth I am, and Mr. Carmichael will be home too if I'm not quick," she added.

"And that matters?" He frowned his dislike, and she again wondered what it was about her employer that aroused his ire. "You've done nothing wrong in coming for a walk, surely?" he said.

"No, no, of course I haven't!" It would be difficult trying to explain about Aunt Carrie and how she had always been more disagreeable when she had been away from her for any length of time. It was hard to break old habits and he might even have understood, but she simply hadn't the time to explain now. "I must go, Mr. Burrows," she insisted. "I'm late now and I have to get ready for dinner."

"Chris!" She blinked at him for a moment uncomprehendingly. "My name's Chris," he reminded

her with a smile, "and I'd like you to use it, if you will."

"Oh yes—thank you." Isa glanced at her watch again and realised just how little time she had left herself before dinner. She started back along the river path and turned briefly to wave a hand.

"Bye !

It was only after she had gone some distance that she realised her parting words to him must have sounded quite abrupt, almost curt, considering the pleasant couple of hours they had just spent together, but she had thought about how far they had walked and her one idea was to get back in time to change and help Lady Carmichael upstairs.

She hurried up the sloping turf from the river, but to her annoyance found she was well off course when she got high enough to see the house. It was still too far off to the right and much further off than she anticipated, and she frowned her frustration as she lengthened her stride even more. There was little hope of getting back before Toby Carmichael came home now, but no one could say she hadn't tried.

Gaining level ground at last the going was easier, but by now she was too short of breath to hurry any more and she expelled a long sigh of exasperation, using the back of her hand to brush the hair back from her damp forehead. There would never be time for her to get herself ready for dinner and give Lady Carmichael her attention as well, but she could not possibly appear at the dinner table looking as she did now. There was nothing for it but to explain,

as she had so often done to Aunt Carrie, and let both her employer and the old lady do their worst. Years of Aunt Carrie had given her a kind of immunity to scoldings, so she was more resigned than fearful.

She found the sitting-room, where she had left Lady Carmichael, empty of its lone occupant, and sighed resignedly. No doubt the old lady had made her own way upstairs to her room because Isa had not been on hand, and that would be another black mark against her. She was almost resigned to being not only reprimanded but perhaps even dismissed as she hurried across the hall towards the stairs.

"Miss McLean!" The call startled her and she gave a gasp of surprise when her arm was clasped by strong fingers and she was brought to a standstill. "What in tarnation have you been up to?" Toby Carmichael demanded, and Isa blinked at him for a moment.

Her hair was untidy from hurrying and she felt stickily hot and dirty. The simple cotton dress she wore was crumpled too and, although she did not realise it, a smudge of dirt from brushing fingers smeared the side of her neck. It was no wonder he looked surprised at her appearance, but Isa saw his calling her back simply as a prelude to an inevitable rebuke and sighed inwardly.

"I know I've been a long time, Mr. Carmichael," she said without giving him time to accuse her. "But I went further than I anticipated and I should have left earlier—"

"Left?"

Isa nodded, her eyes curious. He was not nearly as angry as she expected and it puzzled her. "The river bank," she explained. "I've been down by the river and I forgot the time. I hurried back as fast as I could, but—" She stopped suddenly when she realised he was laughing, and looked at him in disbelief.

It was true, he *was* laughing, his deep blue eyes glittered with it, crinkling at their corners in the way she had noticed at their first meeting, and Isa felt more angry than apologetic suddenly. He looked at her warm cheeks and dishevelled hair and shook his head, as if he found the whole idea of her hurrying all the way back from the river, highly amusing.

"What *have* you been up to?" he asked. "You look as if someone's chasing you!"

"Of course no one's chasing me!" Isa denied hastily, her mind returning briefly to Chris Burrows. "I—I'm late and I've been hurrying, that's all!"

The blue eyes speculated for a moment, then he reached out with one finger and lightly brushed a stray wisp of hair from her neck. "Puffing and blowing," he said with an amused smile. "Why the rush?"

"Because I thought—" She bit back the explanation hastily. It would probably amuse him further to know that she had come scurrying back instinctively because she disliked having to explain herself like an errant schoolgirl, which was what Aunt Carrie had always expected of her. "It doesn't matter," she said.

"Not important?" he suggested quietly, and Isa shrugged, refusing to be drawn.

"I left Lady Carmichael alone," she said. "I've been away over two hours and I thought I—I might get back before you came home."

Her reasons seemed to both puzzle and amuse him, and he laughed softly, shaking his head in disbelief. "I don't believe it 1" he said. "For heaven's sake, child, what did you expect me to do? Make you go without dinner or send you to your room in disgrace?" He was still laughing and shaking his head. "Did you really expect me to behave like a heavy Victorian just because you sneaked out for a couple of hours?"

His amusement made her angry, but at the same time she was forced to realise how unlikely her instinctive reaction would seem to him. He would never have been dependent on someone as she had been on Aunt Carrie, or expected to account for his movements each time he went out, and for a few seconds she not only envied him but almost hated him -too, for his carefree existence.

"I didn't know what you'd do," she said in a small cool voice, and angled her chin defensively. "It was quite likely that you'd sack me on the spot for—for deserting my post or something."

She looked at him and saw that he was still smiling, her own eyes bright and resentful of the fact. "You **think** you deserve to be sacked on the spot?" he asked, and Isa shook her head.

Seen in retrospect her hasty departure from the river bank might seem unreasonable, but years with

Aunt Carrie had conditioned her to react in certain ways and it would take time to eradicate their effect. That was something he couldn't be expected to understand. "I suppose it was a bit silly of me to come dashing back the way I did," she admitted. "But if ever I left Aunt Carrie for very long she was always angry and I thought Lady Carmichael might be too."

There was a bright glitter of laughter in his eyes again and he looked at her curiously. "Who were you most afraid of?" he asked. "Grandmama or me?"

The soft, quiet voice stirred unexpected responses in her and she looked at him for a second, then as hastily looked away again. "I don't know that I'm afraid of either of you, Mr. Carmichael," she said. "But I hate being—I hate doing something perfectly ordinary and then having to make excuses for myself."

For a moment he said nothing, then he slid a hand gently under her chin and raised her face to him, studying her for a while as if he had never really seen her before. "Was she very awful?" he asked gently at last. "Your old aunt?"

The touch of his hand on her face brought strange and exciting emotions into being suddenly and she was aware of a whole new range of sensations as she stood there close to him. The warm, exciting aura of his body, not quite touching her, and the firm, gentle, almost sensual curve of his fingers on her skin. It was all new and unfamiliar to her, and strangely disturbing, so that she struggled to retain

control of her senses.

"She—she wasn't awful at all," she denied throatily, suddenly deprived of her normal voice. "I—I loved her really."

"Did you?" He held her a moment longer, a dark, unfathomable look in his eyes as he looked down at her, then slid his hand from her face in a slow stroking movement, standing quiet before he looked at his watch again. "You'd better go and tidy up for dinner," he told her quietly, and Isa nodded.

"I'll go and help Lady Carmichael first," she said, and looked up swiftly when he laughed.

"Lady Carmichael is helping herself," he informed her. "She told me she was quite capable of doing so and frankly I believe her—but you could just put your head round her door and see if she's managing as well as she thinks she can."

"Oh yes, of course!" She started upstairs, but got no further than the half way mark when he called out to her again and she turned, looking down at him curiously as he stood in the hall.

"Just out of curiosity," he said, his eyes challenging her, "what *have* you been doing?"

Isa hesitated, remembering Chris Burrows' admitted dislike of their mutual employer and wondering if she ought to mention their meeting. She did not know enough yet to even guess if he would object to her talking to his outdoor staff while they were supposed to be working.

"As I told you, Mr. Carmichael," she said, "I've been down by the river."

One brow flicked swiftly upwards and a hint of a

smile just touched his mouth, as if he suspected she was keeping something from him. "All alone?" he asked softly, and Isa flushed, ready to deny him the right to question her movements.

"Mr. Carmichael," she began, "I don't—"

"I know, I know, it's none of my business," he said, swiftly forestalling her protest. "You don't like being questioned about what you do, do you, Isabella?"

It was the first time he had used her christian name, although Lady Carmichael had done so from the beginning, and the familiarity of it gave her a curious feeling of intimacy. "It isn't that," she denied, though so uncertainly that he was unlikely to believe her. "I just—I mean I haven't been doing anything I'm ashamed of, and it *was* my free time. I don't see why—"

"All right!" He held up both hands in a gesture of surrender. "I've got the message!"

He was laughing at her, that was plain, and Isa would have given much to object more forcefully to his interfering with her free time activities, but as yet she was not sure enough of his reaction to chance it. Instead she stayed for a moment, looking down at him as he stood in the big hall and pondering on the complications that Toby Carmichael could cause.

He was an attractive man, more than ordinarily attractive, and Isa had no doubt that he was fully aware of his attractions, but her own aim must be to remain untouched by what she guessed was a very virile and practised charmer. Toby Carmichael

was not the kind of man who would seriously look upon his grandmother's companion as a likely conquest, but the danger would lie in her own susceptibility.

She brought herself hastily back to reality when she realised that he was watching her from the hall, his blue eyes bright and quizzical. "May I go now, Mr. Carmichael?" she asked, and he raised a brow as he glanced at his wristwatch.

"You'd better," he told her, "it's almost dinner time and I hate being kept waiting for my meals!"

"I'm sorry!" She turned and ran on up the stairs, but once again got no more than part way before she was halted.

"Isabella!" She stopped and looked back over her shoulder. "You needn't run," he told her with a laugh. "I shan't sack you if you take time to wash and change!"

Isa would have denied that any such thought was in her head, but instead she merely smiled a little half-heartedly and walked on up the rest of the way, her back held stiff and straight because she knew he was watching her.

CHAPTER THREE

IT was such a novelty for Isa to have free time that actually left her free to do as she liked. that even after nearly four weeks at Trent House she could still savour the idea of being able to go out and not have a barrage of questions to face on her return. She had so far had no inclination to go into town, but spent most of her off-duty time either walking or sitting by the river with a book.

Since their first meeting she had seen quite a bit of Chris Burrows too, mostly when she was walking through the trees beside the river, although they had never so far made it a specific rendezvous. She found him good company and liked him more each time she saw him, for, apart from his violent dislike of Toby Carmichael, he was a pleasant, if somewhat earnest young man, and showed an ever-increasing liking for her company.

On Saturday afternoons Lady Carmichael answered her personal correspondence. Her eyesight was failing and arthritis made writing increasingly difficult, but she refused to have anyone else write her personal letters for her, so she shut herself away in her own little sitting-room upstairs and gave Isa the afternoon off.

Before getting ready to go out Isa put her head round the sitting-room door as she always did, to

check that she was not wanted, and the old lady looked up from her letter-writing, peering over the tops of her spectacles. "Ah, Isabella," she said, "are you going for a walk?" Lady Carmichael always called her by her full name, something that Aunt Carrie had never done because, she said, it was much too grand a name.

Isa smiled. "Unless you need me, Lady Carmichael," she told her, and the old lady frowned and shook her head.

"Your free time is your own, girl," she reminded her shortly. "You have been told so many times!"

It was true, Isa reflected, she had been told often both by Lady Carmichael and her grandson, and she nodded, indicating the sunlight that poured in through the open window of the little room. "It's such a lovely day," she said, "I thought I'd make the most of it and go for a long walk—I'll be back in time for dinner, my lady."

"Yes, yes, yes!" An impatient hand dismissed her promise as unimportant. "Go along and let me write my letters, Isabella. Go along, child!" Isa turned to go, but as she did so she caught the old lady peering at her again' over her spectacles, a dark, shrewd look in her eyes. "Toby is out riding somewhere," she informed her. "You might bump into him."

"I might, of course—goodbye, Lady Carmichael!"

Isa sincerely hoped she would not bump into Toby, but she knew that the watching eyes, no matter how shortsighted, would have detected the faint flush in her cheeks, and she bobbed her head

hastily in farewell and withdrew. As far as possible she avoided too frequent contact with her employer, for she found his casually amused attitude towards her not only annoying, but oddly disturbing too. Chris Burrows' more direct manner was much easier to cope with.

After four weeks at Trent House Lady Carmichael's remarks about her being as pale as cream were no longer true. Frequent walks and sessions in the sunshine and fresh air had given her a light golden tan that complemented her violet eyes and dark hair, and her cheeks had a soft pink colour they had never had before.

She put on a blue linen dress and white sandals and tied back her long hair with a scarf, then took a long look at herself in the mirror before she went out. Aunt Carrie would not have recognised the girl who looked back at her, and she smiled as she turned away—Aunt Carrie would probably not have approved of her either.

It was warmer than she had anticipated when she got outside, and the cool of the river bank seemed an even more inviting prospect. The turf was cool and springy under her sandalled feet as she walked down the hill to the river, a light wind stirring the hair on her neck, while in the near distance the leafy Surrey countryside sprawled hazily in the summer sun. It was an idyll that Isa had only dreamed about when she lived in town, and she knew she would never tire of such surroundings, even in the bleak days of winter.

The trees, as she walked among them, turned off

the sun's heat suddenly and made the air almost chillingly cool so that she shivered for a moment until her body adjusted to the change in temperature. She had not come out with the specific idea of meeting Chris Burrows, any more than she ever did, but the possibility was always there at the back of her mind when she came down here.

When she had gone some distance and still not seen him she began to realise that he had probably been given some work to do elsewhere on the estate, and she was surprised to discover how disappointed she felt. She had come further today than she ever had before, but there was still no sign of him and she resigned herself to a solitary walk.

Almost the entire perimeter of the estate was bordered by trees. One side was a particularly dense-looking wood which she had so far avoided because she did not like the look of it. The other boundary was more inviting, along past Chris Burrows' cottage and along the southern side of the grounds, and she stayed, as she always did, within sound of the water, because in some strange way it made her feel less lost among the trees if the river was audible.

The sun filtered through the branches overhead and sprayed shifting gold patterns on the ground at her feet. It was soft walking, where the fallen leaves of heaven knew how many years formed layers of rich loam and smelled like nothing she had ever smelt before, giving slightly each time she trod on it and making little crackling sounds where twigs and small branches lay under the leaf mould.

Across her path suddenly was a stile. A rickety,

ramshackle erection, it was true, but nevertheless a real old-fashioned stile, and Isa was intrigued. Having virtually spent all her life in town she had never seen a country stile before and she hesitated only briefly before trying it out.

It creaked when *she* put her foot on it and again when she stepped over on to the far side, but it withstood her weight and she smiled as she brushed down her dress, smeared with stain from the mouldering wood. A fence alongside was in an even worse state of repair, for it had at one time apparently been constructed of chestnut staves which were now little more than a straggle of rotting sticks and certainly did no service at all as a fence. Isa did not stop to wonder why it was there but walked on a few yards further into the wood, enjoying the peace and cool of it and the soft sound of the nearby river.

It was the crunching noise of trampled bracken and sticks that heralded the approach of someone else, and the occasional soft, snorting breath of an animal gave her a pretty good idea who the newcomer was. As far as she knew Chris Burrows did not ride a horse and certainly Lady Carmichael didn't, so it could only be one person, and her guess was confirmed only seconds later when Toby Carmichael's voice called to her from the other side of the stile.

"Isabella! What the devil are you doing over there?"

The question struck her as odd since she had done no more than leave one part of the wood for

another, and she disliked the way he questioned her too. She turned in time to see him dismounting, swinging himself down from the saddle with such consummate ease that she could not help but admire his style. The brown mare he rode snorted softly again when he pulled the reins over her head and stood with his hands on his hips, looking across at Isa.

He always looked more rangily lean somehow in riding clothes but just as attractive, and yet again she was forced to recognise that special aura about him that she could never quite define. Instead of the more conventional breeches and long boots, he wore close-fitting fawn trousers and short boots, with a blue shirt that was open at the neck, short-sleeved and revealing strong brown arms that were something of surprise in one of his calling. His dark hair was slightly rumpled, probably from catching on low overhanging branches and, inevitably, he looked faintly amused at finding her there.

Isa looked around her, suspecting at last that she had been wrong to climb over that stile. Then she looked at Toby and found herself reluctant to admit to him that she had not even thought about the stile as a boundary until now. "I just climbed the stile," she told him "Does it matter?"

Briefly he raised his eyes to heaven in appeal. "Does it matter?" he echoed. "Do you want to involve me in a civil war, child? Old Hetherton-Gale will declare a state of emergency if he finds you wandering about on his property! He dislikes trespassers of any sort; and the fact that you're a

female one would be adding insult to injury—he hates women!"

"Oh!" Isa looked round hastily, then caught the glimpse of laughter that lurked in his eyes and frowned again suspiciously. "I don't believe you," she told him, only half convinced of her own argument. "You're just trying to frighten me—I'm sure nobody will mind if I just walk in here!"

"Well, *I* mind !" Toby retorted swiftly. "I had enough trouble with old Hetherton-Gale in the days of my misspent youth. All has been peace and quiet for the last twenty years, I don't want hostilities breaking out again because of you. You come back on your own side, *pronto!*"

Isa hesitated, reluctant to abandon her walk if it was for no other reason than some long-forgotten trouble with a neighbour. If the man was so keen to exclude everyone from his property, surely he would keep the fence in good repair and make sure they couldn't get in. "I don't see that old Mr.—Whatever his name is bothers much about trespassers if he lets the boundary fence get into such a state." she pointed out. "If he—"

"If you don't come back this side, and soon," Toby threatened quietly, "I shall come and forcibly remove you, which will not suit you at all, if I know you!"

"Which you don't!" Isa retorted, but nevertheless walked slowly back towards the stile. She stepped over the top bar, taking her time with the express purpose of letting him know that her decision, to come back had nothing to do with his insistence.

He had released the mare's reins and stood just the other side, one hand extended to help her down, an offer she pointedly ignored. She swung her left leg up and over and it should have cleared the top bar easily, but a snag in the rotting wood caught the hem of her dress and pulled it tight against her leg as she tried to lower it again, throwing her off balance.

With a loud cry of surprise she sprawled inelegantly across the top bar of the stile, her dress firmly caught until the material gave with an ominous rending sound and let her fall. She expected a hard and painful landing across the rough wooden contraption, but at the moment she fell and let out a cry as she fell, strong arms deftly broke her fall, lifting her and pulling her free all in one smooth movement.

It all happened so quickly that Isa had no time to help herself, and she was swept, as if by some irresistible force, against him and held there firmly. Her first instinct was to cling to him and her hands clutched anxiously at his shirt while her face lay the broadness of his chest, close to where his heart beat strongly and steadily in contrast to her own erratic pulses.

Enveloped in the tangy, male warmth of his body, she clung there for several seconds before a sudden surge of inexplicable panic made her lift her head and push against him, and slowly and reluctantly he eased his hold on her.

"I hate to say it," he told her quietly, "but you wouldn't let me give you a hand, would you?"

Isa shook her head, standing for a moment with his long hands spanning her slim waist while she recovered her breath sufficiently to gasp a whispered 'thank you'. It was incredibly difficult to meet that steady gaze and it did disturbing things to her self-control, despite her determined efforts to do something about it as she fought once again with a rising sense of panic. Putting her own hands on top of his, she flinched briefly from the hard warmth of them and tried to prise his fingers loose.

"I'm grateful to you for helping me, Mr. Carmichael," she said in a breathlessly small voice, "but I'm perfectly all right now, thank you."

"Are you?" The spanning hands resisted her efforts to remove them, and there were lines at the corners of his eyes when he smiled. "You almost came a nasty cropper just now by refusing to let me touch you, you'd better be sure this time that you're safe before you dispense with my services."

"I'm perfectly all right !" Isa insisted, and again he smiled.

"„If you say so !" He held her for a few seconds longer, then slid his hands slowly from her waist while he watched her with that steady and disturbing gaze fixed on her mouth. "Maybe you'd better go home before you get into any more mischief," he suggested softly, and Ira's head came up defensively, her eyes resentful.

"Don't speak to me as if I was a naughty child, Mr. Carmichael," she said in a voice that was far from as steady as she hoped. "I'm getting a little tired of it!"

She realised as she said it that the criticism was not only tactless but would probably be resented too, and he looked at her in silence for a moment. "Oh, you are?" he said at last. There was a glitter in his eyes that could as easily have been laughter or anger, she was uncertain which at the moment. "I'm sorry if you consider you've been ill used."

Isa bit her lip and looked at him briefly through her lashes. "I don't consider I'm ill used, Mr. Carmichael," she denied. "But I—I think I have the right to be treated as an adult."

"And I don't?" Toby asked, and Isa nodded.

"Sometimes you don't."

"And you resent it?" She nodded without speaking and he looked at her for a moment in silence. "But not enough to make you give me notice, though?" he suggested, and Isa stared at him, her eyes wide and startled at a new turn of events. Nothing had been further from her mind than leaving Trent House and she faced the possibility of having been too rash in her criticism and spoiling, everything.

"Oh no, of course not," she said. "I don't know—"

"I thought perhaps in view of the insult to your dignity you were considering leaving," he said before she could finish her sentence, and Isa looked at him warily, trying to guess just how serious he was.

"I—I hadn't thought of leaving," she told him, "but if you—"

"I don't count," he said, and there was definitely laughter in his eyes as he cocked a brow at her,

"but Grandmama would miss you now. I'll bet Chris Burrows would too," he added quietly, and Isa flushed.

"I suppose Lady Carmichael's told you about my knowing Mr. Burrows," she said, dismayed to hear how much on the defensive she sounded. "But I only see him in my free time and she doesn't mind. I know he's Lady Carmichael's—your gamekeeper, but—"

"Gamekeeper?" One dark brow flicked swiftly upwards in query. "Is that what he told you?"

Isa looked at him uncertainly and shook her head. "Isn't he?" she asked, and he smiled, a rueful smile that was not quite a grimace of regret.

"It wouldn't be fair to spoil his charade," he said. "If it suits him to call himself a gamekeeper then good luck to him, but I didn't realise he was sufficiently impressed to go to those lengths."

Isa was in two minds whether or not it mattered that Chris Burrows had told an untruth about himself. It didn't matter what his job was on the estate, he was no less attractive as a man whether he was a gamekeeper or something more humble, as Toby's remarks implied. It made no difference to her liking for him, but she was curious to wonder why he had seen fit to lie about it.

"You're implying Chris lied to me," she said in a small cool voice. "I wish you'd tell me what his position is if he isn't a gamekeeper, Mr. Carmichael."

Toby regarded her for a moment, his mouth crooked into a faintly quizzical smile. "Shouldn't

you ask Chris that?" he suggested.

"I prefer not to." Isa didn't really see how she could face Chris with the fact that she knew he had lied to her about his job, not when it was so unimportant.

"No, I suppose not," Toby allowed, following her meaning easily enough. "Well, maybe you'd better go on thinking of him as our gamekeeper—it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Not to me!" Thrusting out her chin in that defiant and challenging way was Purely instinctive and she saw that elusive hint of laughter lurking in his eyes again when he recognised it.

"Ah, so you find him attractive too," he remarked. "How very romantic!"

Without realising she was doing it, Isa's hands curled tightly into her palms and she bit her lip angrily. She had always hated being teased, and on the subject of Chris Burrows she felt especially vulnerable for some unfathomable reason. Perhaps because the position of paid employee was new to her and she resented any suggestion of condescension on the part of her employer.

"I like Mr. Burrows," she said tautly, "and I don't find anything amusing in the fact!"

"You're serious about him?" He looked at her curiously for a second, then smiled. "No, of course you're not! Not after only three weeks—it's not possible!"

Isa flushed, vulnerable as ever to that challenging glint of laughter. "You have no right to laugh at us, Mr. Carmichael," she told him in a small, shaky

voice. "Even servants have the right to fall in love!"

Toby looked at her for a moment as if her words stunned him, then he shook his head slowly. "You use that word love very easily," he said, and in a much more serious voice. "Do you know what you mean by it?"

"Why not?" Isa demanded, rashly uncaring whether he was offended or not. "Are you so much more of an expert on the subject, Mr. Carmichael?"

He looked so fiercely angry for a second that Isa shrank from the result of her own rashness. His blue eyes had a dark glittering look that threatened heaven knew what retribution, and for a moment he stood with his hands tightly curled at his sides, then slowly he shook his head, and a hint of a smile again touched his mouth. "Maybe you'd better tell me," he said, and reached out his hands for her.

Again she was pulled close against him, this time with an almost sensual slowness, his hands sliding round her slim body and drawing her to him while those glittering blue eyes held hers steadily, a hint of smile lending them warmth. His mouth had a firm, warm touch that sent little chills along her spine when he kissed her, lightly at first, becoming gradually more hard until the pressure of his mouth parted her lips and she began to struggle.

It was a futile struggle and he released her mouth only when she was breathless, looking down at her with that sensual lower lip pursed in amusement. Isa looked at him with wide, angry eyes, her hands pushing at him furiously in her determination to be free, furious because she had felt herself almost on

the point of yielding to the strong persuasion of his arms.

"We were talking about love!" she whispered in a small, angry voice, and Toby smiled and shook his head. "That—what you just did had nothing to do with love!"

"It's as much as Chris Burrows has in mind after only four weeks!" he retorted, and laughed as he caught her wrist, stopping the swing towards his face. "Oh no, you don't!" he said quietly.

Isa was trembling with anger and she stood with her hands clenched into fists, his strong fingers curled about one wrist, a bright, angry flush on her cheeks. "There's a name for men like you!" she said, more rash than ever in her anger. "Until now I've never met one, and I wish to heaven I'd never seen *you*, Mr. Carmichael!"

For a moment he said nothing, but the smile still lingered in his eyes although his mouth had a tighter look about it. "And I think you'd better go back the way you came before I forget you're just a little girl," he said at last.

'Isa said nothing; her heart was thudding relentlessly hard at her ribs and she felt quite alarmingly breathless, as if she had been running a long way. Although she was angry and considered she had every right to be angry, she also felt a strange sense of elation which was quite inexplicable.

He was standing immediately in front of her, tall and straight with his hands thrust deep into the top pockets of his trousers and his head back, looking at her down the length of his nose, his eyes

shadowed by those quite uncannily long eyelashes. "Did you hear me?" he asked, and Isa nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Carmichael."

"Then go!" he insisted quietly but firmly. "Before old Hetherton-Gale comes prowling around and suspects you of trespass!"

Without a word Isa turned and started back towards the river, her heart still pounding uncontrollably in her breast, but she had gone no more than a couple of yards when he called her. Turning, she saw him already sitting in the saddle again, the very embodiment of arrogant masculinity, his eyes holding hers for a moment before he spoke.

"Better not tell Chris Burrows about that little episode," he advised quietly, and with a seriousness that was belied by the laughter in his eyes. "He'll only see it as proof of my—depravity?"

He put a soothing hand on the restless mare's neck and smiled, then jabbed his heels sharply against her flanks and waved one hand to Isa as the mare took off like a shot. "Stay on your side of the fence!" he called over his shoulder, and Isa caught the sound of his laughter as he disappeared among the trees.

Isa admitted to being much more wary of Toby Carmichael since the episode in the wood, for there was something about him that she found infinitely disturbing and it was impossible to ignore it.

She was curious too about the minor mystery of Chris Burrows' position, and just what he did on the estate, but she could not bring herself to ask

him as Toby had suggested. To do so would betray the fact that she had been discussing him with Toby Carmichael, and in view of his animosity towards him, it was really not a very good idea. It had even crossed her mind that she might elicit the information from Lady Carmichael, but she dismissed that idea too.

She had been a little more than six weeks at Trent House and had known Chris for most of that time, so that she was ready enough to admit being very fond of him. It was quite evident that he felt even more strongly about her, perhaps more than she was prepared for at the moment, and she considered Toby's derision about either of them being able to fall in love in only four weeks.

It was longer now, but even so six weeks was very little time to be sure about anything so important as being seriously in love. Chris was very attractive, but in a sober and quiet way that was quite different from Toby's more flamboyant style. Flamboyant she dismissed a second later as being perhaps untrue and a little unfair. Toby was practised in the art of persuasion, but sophisticated, not flamboyant. Chris was quiet and cautious in his approach whereas Toby, she was prepared to believe, would be bold and decisive in his determination, once he had decided a woman attracted him.

Once more she shook off the persistent image of Toby Carmichael and took a last look at herself in the mirror as she always did. Her long dark hair shone like brown silk in the light from the window, and there was a bright eager look in her eyes

brought about by sheer contentment. Her dress was simply cut in green and white cotton and had a softly feminine look and she was well enough pleased with the overall effect to smile at her reflection before turning away. For a week now she had been promising to visit Chris's little cottage near the river, but she had not found the time until now, and she felt strangely unsure of herself as she went downstairs.

Someone came out of the sitting-room as she crossed the hall and she instinctively looked around to see who it was, not really surprised when she saw Toby Carmichael looking at her quizzically. "All dressed up and nowhere to go?" he asked quietly, and Isa shook her head.

"Not at all, Mr. Carmichael," she told him. "I *have* somewhere to go."

The blue eyes crinkled into laughter and he nodded as he came across to join her. "Oh yes, of course," he said, "you'll be meeting Chris Burrows."

"I'm calling on him to be exact," Isa informed him, swiftly on the defensive, and saw the dark frown that drew his brows together.

"You mean you're visiting his cottage?" he asked, and she nodded.

"That's right."

He stood beside a small table that held the telephone, one hand in a pocket and the other resting palm down on the table top, and she could tell by his expression that the idea did not meet with his approval. Not that she meant to let his opinion dissuade her, but the idea of his disapproving intrigued

her as much as it annoyed her.

"You realise what you're doing, I hope," he said at last in what Isa privately called his 'bossy' voice, and she nodded.

"Yes, of course I know, Mr. Carmichael," she said. "I'm not a child."

"So you've told me before," he remarked dryly, "but I'm not sure I'm convinced."

Isa would have liked to simply walk away and leave him, but instead she looked at him angrily, resenting his attitude as she always did when she considered he was being patronising. "I've also told you before that I don't consider anything I do in my free time is any concern of yours, Mr. Carmichael," she told him with as much dignity as she could muster. "I promised to call on Mr. Burrows and I'm going to do just that!"

"Little Miss Head-in-air," he said dryly, his eyes bright with mingled amusement and exasperation. "You know nothing about Chris Burrows, do you?" She looked at him, curious and suspicious of his motives, but she was also shaking her head in answer to his question. "And yet you don't think twice about calling on him at his cottage?"

"I—I know him well enough to—to trust him," she said, and wondered if she was also trying to convince herself as well. She could have added that she would trust Chris Burrows much further than she would Toby Carmichael himself, but she kept that to herself.

For a moment he said nothing, then suddenly and unexpectedly he put a hand to her face, curving his

long fingers to the softness of her left cheek. "Just watch your step, Isabella," he said quietly, and Isa coped with the quite alarming increase in her heart-beat, trying to curb its response to his touch.

"I can take care of myself," she said a little breathlessly, and he smiled.

"I hope so," he said, and before she realised his intent he bent his head and brushed his lips lightly across her forehead. "I hope so," he whispered.

Chris wasn't exactly expecting her, but he was not completely surprised to see her either, and Isa was glad she had followed her own instincts in the matter instead of allowing Toby to influence her. There was surely nothing untrustworthy about Chris Burrows' earnest features and he welcomed her so warmly that it was obvious how pleased he was to see her.

The cottage was small, but it was neat and clean and looked very picturesque set amid the trees beside the river. It was quiet there too, except for the sound of the water and the usual indeterminate stirrings always audible in woodland, and for the first time Isa realised how isolated they were from human contact. Not that she was actually nervous, but the cottage was isolated and try as she would she could not entirely dismiss Toby's implication that Chris was not completely to be trusted.

"I hardly dared hope you'd come," Chris told her earnestly as he saw her seated, then went to put on the kettle. "I'm delighted that you did."

Isa smiled, seeking to cover her faint doubt with

an air of assurance. "Why shouldn't I come?" she asked, and Chris appeared again in the kitchen doorway, his grey eyes briefly darkened when he mentioned the man he disliked so much.

"I expected *Mr.* Carmichael to try and put you off coming to see me," he said. "I'm glad you didn't let him!"

For a second or two she hesitated, wondering how wise it would be to mention anything about the conversation with Toby. Chris seemed to take it for granted that he was aware of her plans to visit him and she decided there was nothing to be gained by reporting his actual warning, so she shrugged and laughed a little uneasily. "I'm not easily influenced," she told him lightly. "I make up my own mind about people."

"And you've made up your mind about me?" He asked the question softly, and the grey eyes watched her closely for a moment, almost as if he expected her to express an opinion on a matter left unspoken, although she could not imagine what it could be. Then he left his place in the kitchen doorway and came across to her, standing beside her chair, one arm along the back of it, the fingers of his left hand just touching her neck and sending little shudders of warning through her. "Have you made up your mind about me, Isa?" he prompted when she did not reply, and Isa looked up at him, a shadow of doubt making her violet eyes look as dark as midnight.

The gauntly good-looking face had an open honest look and his eyes looked at her with a

steadiness that must surely inspire confidence so that after a moment she smiled and nodded. "Yes, I have," she said, quelling the echo of Toby's warning firmly. "I shouldn't be here if I didn't—like you, you must know that, Chris."

"I hoped you did!" He smiled as if a weight had been lifted from his mind and the fingers touching her neck became a definite caress, lightly soothing on her soft skin and arousing a swift response in her heartbeat.

She was not quite sure what she expected next, but his sudden departure in the direction of the kitchen left her both mildly surprised and curious. Most other men would surely have followed up that caress with something more positive, certainly Toby Carmichael would have, but Chris simply walked out into the kitchen and set about making tea.

It was some time after they had finished drinking their tea that Chris got up from his chair suddenly, one hand rubbing nervously over the back of his head. He stood over her for several seconds, his gaze **fixed** on her face with a certain air of indecision, then he reached down for her hands and pulled her to her feet, his grasp strong and firm as he held her for a moment without speaking. Then he drew her closer, putting his arms around her, and she glanced up at the bright, glittering shine in his eyes.

"Isa!" His arms tightened, pulling her against him, and his face bent over her own, hovering for a second before he brought his mouth down over hers in a kiss that was not quite what she expected. It was more tentative than emotional and left her

feeling vaguely disappointed, despite the unexpectedness of it.

"Please, Chris!" She managed to free herself without too much trouble, although he relinquished his hold on her reluctantly and looked down at her for a second with a look of reproach in his eyes.

"I thought you'd made up your own mind about me," he said with a hint of sulkiness that surprised her.

"So I have," she agreed, shaking her head. "But I——"

"Don't you know how I feel about you?" he asked. "Didn't you guess, Isa?"

It was all happening a little too quickly for her, and Isa shook her head to try and clear it. It was plain what Chris was trying to say and she should have been prepared for it, but she had deliberately avoided thinking of Chris in that way. She had seen his feelings for her growing in intensity over the weeks, but had banked on his normal reticence keeping him silent about it, at least until she had time to determine the depth of her own emotions.

"I—I had some idea," she admitted at last, then shook her head again. "But six weeks isn't very long, Chris, and I—well, I honestly don't feel anything like that for you. I'm sorry."

He said nothing for a long moment, but stood looking down at her, almost as if he blamed her for her frankness, then he too shook his head, and a faint hint of a smile touched his mouth as he put his hands on her arms again, gently and without any suggestion of an embrace.

"Six weeks *isn't* very long," he agreed quietly. "I'm sorry, Isa, I shouldn't have tried to hurry you as I did, but seeing you here, in my cottage, I couldn't resist kissing you." The grey eyes looked down at her appealingly. "Am I forgiven?" he begged, and Isa impulsively tip-toed and brushed his cheek with her lips.

"Of course," she said. She glanced at her wrist-watch, almost automatically, and brushed a smoothing hand down her dress. "I think it might be better if I went now," she suggested, praying he would not see her departure as a protest against his kissing her, but she needed time to think and she honestly believed that if she stayed any longer, before long he would kiss her again and at the moment she was very unsure of her own feelings.

"So soon?" He looked at the clock on the mantel, and frowned. "Isa, please don't mistrust me—I promise I won't step out of line again."

She hesitated, but there was really no doubt in her own mind what was the best thing to do at the moment. She must have time to think about the situation with Chris, and she needed to be alone to do that. "I don't mistrust you," she promised, looking at that handsome, earnest face and wondering if she was being too cautious. "I—I have a lot on my mind, Chris, and I'd like to have time to think."

"Yes, of course you would!" His fingers tightened for a moment on her arms, then he dropped his hands and stepped back to allow her to pass him. He walked with her to the door of the cottage and stood for a moment with her on the shaded step, a

crease of anxiety between his brows as he looked down at her. "You *will* come again, won't you, Isa?" he asked, and she nodded.

"I'll come again," she promised, but wondered even then if she had made a promise it would be better not to keep. Suddenly Toby's warnings were running around her brain again, and this time they were not so easy to still.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT was one morning before breakfast, while Isa was brushing her hair prior to going downstairs, that there was an insistent rapping on her bedroom door and she turned from the mirror frowning curiously, the hairbrush still poised in one hand. There was a hint of urgency in the knocking and she held her breath for a moment wondering if something could be wrong with Lady Carmichael.

She walked over and opened the door, and her frown of anxiety changed to surprise when she saw Toby Carmichael standing there, a strangely speculative look on his face and a hint of a smile banishing any chance of there being something wrong with his grandmother.

He looked freshly shaved and smelled pleasantly of aftershave, and he was fully dressed except for his racket. A white shirt added depth to the colour of his tanned features and fitted smoothly across his broad chest, while hip-hugging dark blue trousers with flared legs gave him a slightly nautical look which was further suggested by his stance. Feet slightly apart on the slip mat in front of her door, he looked as if he was prepared to carry her off, pirate fashion, and her heart responded to the suggestion by hammering unmercifully hard in her breast.

Isa blinked at him uncertainly and his smile

widened. "Good morning," he said, in a cool quiet voice. "Can you cook?"

For several seconds Isa stared at him blankly, almost believing she must still be asleep and dreaming, although there was certainly nothing ethereal about Toby's distinctly physical presence in her doorway. Also she detected unmistakable signs of impatience and she nodded hastily, blinking as she sought reasons for his asking such an extraordinary question at that hour in the morning.

"I—I don't think I quite understand," she said at last. "You asked if I—"

"If you can cook," he confirmed. "Can you?"

"Yes, I can, but—I don't understand why—"

"You don't have to understand anything at the moment," Toby interrupted impatiently, "except the rudiments of frying a basic breakfast, eggs and bacon, that kind of thing. Can you cope with that?"

"Well, yes, of course," Isa said in a slightly breathless voice, "but if you'd—"

"Good, you're needed!" Toby informed her. He raked a frankly appraising gaze over her trim figure in its cream cotton dress and ignored her puzzled expression, one brow raised enquiringly. "You were about to come downstairs, weren't you?" he asked.

Isa still stared at him, not yet sure what it was all about, the brush held in one hand in front of her, like a weapon of defence, its original purpose completely forgotten as she tried to make some sense of the situation. "Mr. Carmichael," she said in a strained voice, "I just don't understand! Why

do you need me to cook breakfast? Where's Mrs. Grayle?"

Toby heaved a great sigh, as if he sought patience in the face of incredible stupidity. "It's a long story," he told her with every appearance of showing restraint. "We've had a catastrophe in the domestic department, and unless you can cook we'll all go hungry. All you have to do is provide some sort of, sustenance to keep us going until lunch-time, after that I can probably find someone to stand in. Do this now and we'll be forever in your debt!"

"Oh, I see, it really *is* a crisis!" Isa hesitated no longer, although she would have liked to question him about the cause of Mrs. Grayle's inability to perform her usual chores. If it was an emergency, as he suggested, she was willing enough to provide breakfast. Aunt Carrie had been as fastidious about teaching her to cook as about everything else, so she had no doubt about her ability to cope.

She hastened to complete her half-finished toilette, pulling the brush through her hair as she walked back across the room and pausing only to take a last look at her general appearance. Turning to smooth down her dress she caught sight of Toby's reflection in the dressing-table mirror, his brows drawn into a frown of impatience. She met the imperious glint in his eyes as she put down the hairbrush and lifted her chin, daring him to say anything.

"All right, Isabella," he said in a deceptively soft voice, "you look suitably sweet and neat, now will

you *please* hurry?"

Isa flushed, her eyes bright with resentment. "I am hurrying, Mr. Carmichael," she told him, "and I don't see—"

"You don't have to see," Toby interrupted, "but I have an early appointment this morning and in the interests of good manners I can't interview a client when I have an empty stomach !" He touched her cheek lightly with one finger tip and she drew back hastily. "I'm starving, Isa !"

"Well, I'm sorry!" She stuck her chin in the air as she swept past him in the doorway, angry as much because her senses responded to him so willingly as because of his arrogant assumption that she was prepared to cook breakfast for him. "I'm not employed to cook for you," she reminded him with a flash of bravado. "I'm employed as a companion to—"

"You're employed to do as you're told!" Toby retorted, his eyes glittering. "Now come along, for heaven's sake!"

Ira glared at him. "For two pins I'd refuse!" she told him, and he laughed.

"You do and I'll sack you on the spot !" he warned.

"You wouldn't dare!"

The words were spoken before she realised the full audacity of the challenge, and she saw the swift glow of half amused anger in his eyes as he looked down at her. "You think not?" he asked, and Isa shook her head.

"Lady Carmichael wouldn't let you," she told

him, confident she was right.

For a second he did nothing, then he laughed again shortly, and shook his head. "Just don't put that to the test!" he warned, and she gasped aloud when his fingers curled suddenly around the soft upper part of her arm and dug in hard as he turned her round.

She was hauled along beside him the full length of the landing to the top of the stairs, and instinctively pulled back against the relentless grip on her arm. "You're hurting me!" she protested as they started downstairs, and once again he laughed at her efforts.

"I'm not civilised when I'm hungry," he told her. "So the sooner you get me fed the sooner you'll restore my good humour! I haven't time for the polite will you, won't you bit, not with poor old Grayle waiting in agony for the ambulance to come, and my stomach begging for satisfaction—there simply isn't time to argue the issue!"

Isa stared. "The ambulance?" she echoed, and he nodded.

"PIT explain later," he said. "Right now just take my word for it that you're desperately needed!"

Isa prised his fingers from her arm and continued downstairs. "All *right!*" she said, and he laughed.

"That's my girl !" he said encouragingly. "Now you go and wrap a pinny round your dainty middle and wield the frying pan while I see Mrs. Grayle safely into the ambulance—it sounds as if it's arrived."

She barely had time to see the crew of the ambulance come in through the open front door before Toby gave her a swift and insistent push through another door into the kitchen. It was the first time Isa had been into the kitchen and she spent a moment or two looking around her, getting her bearings and marvelling at the modern and expensive equipment to hand.

After a moment she found a frying pan and heated it, then put in rashers of bacon from the huge refrigerator. She added two eggs, since Toby had said he was hungry, and she was making toast when the kitchen door opened again and he came in. Turning a face, pink flushed from the cooker, she asked anxiously after the housekeeper.

"Is Mrs. Grayle all right?" she asked, and he raised a brow.

"She can hardly be 'all right' when she's just been taken off in an ambulance," he pointed out with what she felt was unnecessary fastidiousness. "She'll be lucky if she hasn't a broken leg at least, and slip's hurt herself internally too, apparently, poor soul."

His sympathy surprised Isa enough to make her overlook his sarcasm, and she spent a moment wondering just how the accident had happened. There was no sign of disorder in the immaculate kitchen, so obviously it must have occurred somewhere else. "What happened?" she asked, and Toby shook his head, perching himself on the end of the kitchen table.

"She seemingly fell from a chair in her bedroom,"

he told her, "although heaven knows what she was doing climbing on a chair in her bedroom. I couldn't get much out of the poor old soul, but I heard her yell, right along where I was." He slid from the table suddenly and came striding across towards her with such an air of purpose that Isa blinked at him in surprise.

Reaching round her, he pulled the grill pan from under the gas and blew hard at the flames that licked up from the slices of burnt toast. "I prefer my toast brown, not black," he said, handing her the smoking grill pan with the charred remains. "I hope this isn't a sample of your cooking, Isabella!"

Blaming him in part for distracting her, Isa looked at him resentfully. "I've already cooked you a perfectly edible breakfast, Mr. Carmichael," she told him, brushing the hair back from her flushed face with the back of one wrist. "You have nothing to complain about! Where are you going to eat it?"

He looked around at the long, scrubbed wooden table «and cocked a questioning brow at her, a glitter of laughter in his eyes and just touching his mouth. "You'd rather I had it right here, wouldn't you?" he asked, but gave her no time to answer. "O.K., just give me something to eat and I'll settle for eating it in the kitchen—I don't care as long as I get something soon!"

Without another word Isa found a knife and fork and laid a place for him at one end of the table, then set the bacon and eggs she had cooked for him down in front of him with a resounding thud on the

bare wood. "The toast won't be long," she told him coolly, refusing to be angry. "The butter's in that big pot dish there in front of you !"

"Thank you!"

She ignored his sarcasm and watched him rather anxiously as he began to eat. His claim to be ravenously hungry was apparently no exaggeration, for he ate the bacon and eggs in a very short time and then asked for more toast, and it gave her a curious sense of satisfaction when he at last leaned back in his chair, seemingly replete.

He eyed her for a moment, his eyes gleaming wickedly with laughter, missing nothing of her flushed cheeks and dishevelled hair, or the big checked apron that tied around her waist and met at the back. She had eaten nothing herself and had no intention of doing so until after he had gone.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked, still watching her steadily, and Isa shook her head.

"I can have mine later with Lady Carmichael," she told him.

"I see." He tipped back his chair on to its back legs and seemed suddenly to have forgotten that early appointment he had been concerned for earlier. "I suppose you'll lay a decent table in the morning-room," he suggested, "and do it in style. Not rough it in the kitchen, like I had to!"

"You didn't *have* to!" Isa denied swiftly. "It was your own idea!"

He laughed and the sound of it shivered along her spine as she hastily avoided his eyes. "You're touchy, aren't you?" he said.

Isa resented the suggestion, although she supposed it was true in a way. She was almost always touchy when he teased her about anything, and this morning she felt particularly vulnerable. "I don't think so," she argued automatically. "After all, you did come and practically haul me downstairs before I had time to get up properly. You informed me I *had* to cook your breakfast, then blamed me when the toast burnt!"

His eyes gleamed with laughter, and Isa could cheerfully have thrown something at him. "Ah! Poor little Isabella!" he said softly.

There was an insolent, challenging arrogance about him that gave her the strangest sensation, and she did what she could to still the frantic urgency of her heartbeat when he got up from the table suddenly and came round it to stand in front of her. His eyes went slowly from the top of her dark head, down the soft curves that were accentuated by the apron tied tightly about her waist, down to the slim legs that were bare and tanned to a light colour by the sun. There was a kind of smouldering sexuality in the scrutiny and she felt her head spinning from the impact of it as she reached behind her for the support of the work-top beside the cooker.

"Isabella!"

He said it softly, almost like a caress, and his deep voice shivered through her like a physical sensation. One hand reached out and slid round her waist drawing her towards him irresistibly, until her body recoiled instinctively from the warmth of his

flesh through the thin shirt he wore. His other hand slid beneath the hair at the back of her neck and held her head firmly, then he bent his head and just touched her lips with the sensual warmth of his mouth.

It was a teasing, almost a taunting gesture, and Isa felt again that flutter of panic she had experienced when he kissed her before. She tried hard to wriggle free, but uselessly, for his mouth was no longer teasing, but firm and demanding, drawing resistance from her as he pressed her close to the unyielding force of his body.

How long she stood like that, her whole length curved to his, her head spinning with a chaos of unfamiliar and disturbing emotions, she had no idea, but she clung to him like a drowning child and wanted it never to end. It was the insistent ringing of a bell that brought her joltingly back to earth and she opened startled eyes, turning her head swiftly with her mouth still tingling from his kiss.

"Please--don't!" She whispered the plea when Toby turned her face to him again and brushed her lips lightly with his own just as the discordant summons interrupted again and made her start guiltily.

The bell was one of many arranged along a board above the kitchen door, and it jangled persistently as she stared at it, taking a moment or two to realise that it was Lady Carmichael's bell sounding such an urgent summons. Isa shook her head, pushing against the broadness of his chest where her hands still lay curled tightly over the steady thud of his heartbeat.

He broke his hold on her with obvious reluctance and she moved away, glancing up swiftly in startled disbelief a moment later when a soft chuckle drew her attention from the jangling bell. "Saved by the bell !" Toby quoted, and Isa stepped back quickly, her cheeks brightly flushed as she trembled on the brink of uncertainty.

Yet again she had been foolish enough to allow herself to be swept along into a situation she could not control, and for a brief moment she hated him. For his ability to touch her as deeply as he had for those few minutes and for deluding her into believing that the moment was something special when actually it was merely another brief flirtation and probably of no more importance to him than a hundred other such kisses.

The realisation was hard to swallow after the emotional upheaval of a few seconds before and she only just resisted the urge she felt to slap his face hard. But she had tried to retaliate like that once before and been frustrated—there was no reason to suppose that she would be any more successful this time.

Instead she turned quickly and fled from the big kitchen on legs so weak and shaky that they threatened to let her down. She would never again let herself become involved with Toby Carmichael in anything as disturbing as the last few minutes—no matter what the temptations!

Whether or not Lady Carmichael would have had any objections to her grandson indulging his pas-

sion for conquest with her companion, Isa did not know, but she fervently hoped that the old lady need never hear about it. Isa had managed to keep things well under control ever since the first time Toby had kissed her, when he caught her trespassing in the wood, and she was almost as angry with herself as with him for letting the same thing happen again.

One kiss was perhaps of no great importance in itself, but it disturbed Isa to think that Toby Carmichael could have such a devastating effect on her will power. In her rather sheltered existence with Aunt Carrie she had met very few young men at all, and certainly no one like Toby, and it had never occurred to her that any man could create such havoc as he did simply by kissing her. Aunt Carrie, she felt sure, would never have approved of him.

Lady Carmichael was kind to her in her own way, but Isa saw her as a woman of strong moral principles, and if she saw Isa as an undesirable distraction for her grandson it would be natural enough for her to want the distraction removed. She did not know for sure that the old lady would see things in that light, but neither was she prepared to risk her present comfortable position for the sake of a brief flirtation, however exciting the prospect might be.

Sunshine streamed in through the tall windows of the sitting-room and the old lady closed her eyes against its dazzle while appreciating its warmth. As so often happened when she appeared to be asleep, she spoke without opening her eyes and Isa looked

up swiftly at the tone of her question. "Have you been seeing a lot of young Burrows lately?" she asked.

Isa hesitated, for almost certainly Toby must have been her informant, it couldn't have been anyone else, and she hated the idea of his carrying tales to his grandmother—it was so out of character somehow. She licked her lips, uncertain just where such interest would lead. Perhaps Lady Carmichael saw an attachment to Chris Burrows as an insurance against too much interest in her grandson.

"I suppose Mr. Carmichael told you about us," she ventured.

"It doesn't matter who told me," Lady Carmichael said firmly. "I may be confined to the house, child, but I am not cut off from the world completely." The sun lent a pale golden sheen to the autocratic features, and the closed lids had a thin transparent look, but there was nothing weak or senile about her at all, and Isa scarcely resisted a Mile when the original matter was doggedly returned to, despite its personal tone. "Well?" the old lady urged. "*Have* you been seeing young Burrows a lot lately?"

"I suppose so, my lady," she allowed cautiously. "I mostly see him on my days off, when I'm walking or down by the river."

"Hmm!" The eyes did not open, but a small frown drew her sparse brows together. "Is there anything serious between you?" she asked, and again Isa hesitated. At once the bright, shrewd eyes

flicked wide open and regarded her sharply. "Well, child? You know that, surely!"

"I don't really think I do," Isa told her, truthfully enough. "I—I *like* Mr. Burrows, but as for anything else—well, I just don't know."

"Not good enough for you, hmm?" Surprisingly a soft chuckle followed the suggestion, and Isa was given no opportunity to object to it. "Well, you know your own mind best, I dare say," the old lady allowed, "but I would have thought a romantic young girl like you would have found young Burrows very much to her liking, with those gaunt, gloomy old looks. You could do worse, child, far worse, if you are serious about him."

"Lady Carmichael," Isa began, left breathless by the swift summing up of Chris Burrows' assets as a husband, "I don't—"

"If you're going to tell me that it's none of my business," Lady Carmichael told her, "you'd better think again, young lady! The welfare of my domestic staff is my business, and I happen to like you, no matter what you might suppose to be the contrary! Does that surprise you?" she demanded.

Isa's heart warmed, for she believed it to be true that the old lady had a certain affection for her. In her own way she had betrayed it several times, though never perhaps consciously. "I'm flattered," she said softly, and smiled at the strong intelligent face below soft white hair

Lady Carmichael snorted her opinion of such sentiments. "Nonsense!" she said forcefully. "I don't flatter *anyone*, child, I merely state my opinion!"

"Well then, I'm glad you like me," Isa told her, emboldened by the kindness she knew to be behind that seemingly harsh façade, "because I like you too, no matter what you might suppose to the contrary!"

"Impudent child!" For a moment Isa wondered if she had gone too far in quoting the old lady's own words to her, but then she saw a hint of a smile curve the thin lips at their corners, and breathed an inward sigh of relief. "And just how much do you like my grandson?" she asked.

Isa's heart leapt into her mouth, then set up a rapid and urgent beating that sounded like drumbeats in her ears. "I—I like Mr. Carmichael," she said, wishing her voice sounded less husky and that she could avoid the shrewd eyes that noted her flushed cheeks.

"Hmm!" Again that non-committal little sound left her opinion in doubt, and Isa wondered if it was possible that the old lady knew as much about those brief episodes with Toby as she, seemed to know about Chris Burrows. The thought was discomfiting and she said no more for the moment while Lady Carmichael's shrewd old eyes regarded her steadily. "I can see that Toby is a subject you prefer not to discuss," Lady Carmichael said quietly, and briefly a small, almost sly smile touched the thin mouth and softened the whole face. "Very well, child, I shall say no more about it. I know my grandson—rather too well, I'm afraid!"

It was not easy, after her earlier misgivings, to realise that far from objecting Lady Carmichael

fully expected Toby to behave as he had, and for a moment Isa resented her calm acceptance of it. She glanced through her lashes at the old lady, now apparently fallen into a daze again, the sun warm on her face, her expression smooth and content, and sighed inwardly as she returned to her sewing.

She sat for some time in silence while the old lady dozed in her chair and wondered if now was the time to approach the matter of asking for a full day off in lieu of her usual half-day. The idea had been in her mind for some time now, and she had little doubt that she would be allowed to do as she asked, but years of being with Aunt Carrie had made her hesitant about asking for anything.

"Lady Carmichael," she said hesitantly, and the bright, dark eyes were open instantly, "I—I wondered if I could have my usual two half-days in one," she ventured, and took hope from the fact that there was so far no discouraging frown. "I'd like to do some shopping," she went on, "and I thought if I had a whole day in town—"

"In London?" Lady Carmichael asked, and Isa hastily shook her head.

"Oh no, my lady, just into Sherwell."

"I see no reason why you cannot do so," the old lady told her. "If you can get what you want in Sherwell."

"I'm sure I can, thank you." She hesitated to express concern about her charge during her absence, because such a thing was bound to be ridiculed by the old lady, but the idea of leaving her for a whole day was the one flaw in the idea that

she could see. "I—I don't altogether like leaving you for a whole day, my lady," she ventured cautiously. "Perhaps if someone—"

"You have no need to concern yourself about me, child!" A careless hand dismissed the matter as unimportant. "I shall arrange for someone to be here when I want them, you need concern yourself only with your day's outing. How are you traveling?"

Isa shook her head. "I hadn't thought about it, my lady," she said. "By bus, I suppose—there's quite a good service from here into Sherwell."

"Nonsense!" Again the autocratic hand dismissed her suggestion. "Toby can drive you in with him when he goes to his office. It will make things much easier for you than going on one of those wretchedly overcrowded buses and, since you will be there all day, you can drive back with him in the evening, then you won't have the problem of struggling with your shopping."

Isa bit her lip, seeing too late how she had left herself wide open to such a suggestion, but it was unlikely that the old lady would change her mind, having decided, no matter what objections she raised. "It—it really isn't necessary, my lady," she told her. "I can manage perfectly well on the bus."

"Why on earth should you manage?" Lady Carmichael demanded, her frown deepening. "How can you prefer to struggle on and off public transport when you have the simple alternative of driving there and back by car?" The dark eyes studied her narrowly for a moment, speculative as well as

curious. "Have you some reason for not wishing to drive in with my grandson?" she asked, and Isa hastily shook her head.

"Oh no, of course not, Lady Carmichael!"

The old lady nodded, as if the matter was already settled to her satisfaction, but she still looked at Isa curiously. "You haven't already arranged to go with Chris Burrows, have you?" she asked. "If so, for heaven's sake why didn't you say so, child?"

"I haven't," Isa denied hastily, and the old lady's thin mouth smiled again briefly, a slightly malicious smile that glittered like jet in her eyes.

"But perhaps you think he might object to your going with Toby!" she suggested softly. "Is that it, Isabella?"

"Oh no, not at all !" Isa said. "Mr. Burrows isn't in a position to object to anything I do!"

"Then there can be no possible objection, can there?" Lady Carmichael declared, and closed her eyes again, as if she considered there was no more to be said.

Iv, with a sigh of resignation, went back to her sewing once again, but not for very long. "How much do you know about Chris Burrows?" the old lady asked suddenly, and Isa stared at her for a moment uncomprehendingly, her heart pulsing uneasily for some inexplicable reason.

"I—I know that he's your—that he works for Mr. Carmichael," she said cautiously, only just stopping herself in time from referring to Chris as her gamekeeper. "I'm not sure in what capacity exactly, I've never asked."

Once again the shrewd bright eyes opened and looked at her speculatively for a moment. "I believe gardener-handyman is the official designation," Lady Carmichael said. "Do you find that strange?"

"In a way I do," Isa admitted, without giving reasons, and the old lady made one of those small, non-committal sounds again.

"He had a very good education, as you'll have noticed," she went on. "The pity is he hadn't the spirit to put it to better use!"

The rather acid comment surprised Isa, and something about the tone of the old lady's voice made her suspect that she knew much more about Chris Burrows than the rather sketchy knowledge of the average employer. "I had noticed that he speaks very 'well,'" Isa admitted. "But we haven't talked much about our respective backgrounds."

The old lady nodded, as if she understood, and Isa looked at her through her lashes, frankly curious about Chris, but unwilling to betray her curiosity too obviously. "One should feel some

for him, I suppose," Lady Carmichael said, and gave the impression that such an emotion would not come easily to her in this instance. "I don't know if he's told you, but he was at school with Toby—they've known each other more or less all their lives."

"Oh!" Isa blinked at the revelation—it was something she had not expected.

"I knew both Kay and Arthur Burrows," Lady Carmichael went on, apparently bent on confidences. "I knew them for a number of years, al-

though they were never close friends, and I know how hard it was for Kay Burrows to cope with her situation—a husband who gambled and drank to such an extent that his son was left destitute." The strong, stern face had a look of pity briefly, then she shook her head slowly. "But I find it hard to pity a man who sinks into self-pity when he is left alone to cope with his own life!"

"His mother died too?" Isa asked, feeling for Chris in his helplessness, although she had coped much better herself in similar circumstances.

Lady Carmichael nodded. "The fool killed both himself and his wife in a car crash, less than a year after Christopher came down from university."

"Poor Chris!" Isa's softly spoken sympathy did not go unnoticed, and the sharp, dark eyes narrowed as they looked at her.

"You knew nothing about it?" Lady Carmichael asked, and Isa shook her head.

"Nothing," she said, and looked at the old lady steadily for a moment. Despite the avowed lack of sympathy, she thought she knew how it was that Chris came to be working for Lady Carmichael and why he stubbornly insisted that she and not Toby was his employer. "You gave him that job, didn't you, my lady?" she suggested quietly. "Because you wanted to help him?"

For a moment it seemed that she might admit to such a sentimental gesture, but only for a moment, and then the frown reappeared and her mouth tightened. "The estate needed a man to tend the gardens and look after the various other chores,"

Lady Carmichael said in a harsh, sharp voice that denied any suggestion of charity. "Chris Burrows was drifting aimlessly, doing nothing at all with his life—it was a matter of common sense to put one with the other."

"It was kind and understanding," Isa insisted gently. "I know Chris is happy working for you, Lady Carmichael, and he thinks a lot of you."

Again the old lady's dark eyes narrowed shrewdly and she looked at Isa for a moment before she spoke. "I'm glad he's settled down to it," she said after a moment or two. "I had thought he might perhaps leave when the estate was made over to Toby." She looked at Isa sharply again. "You knew about that?" Isa nodded. "He and Toby never got on, even at school, and I know he must resent working for him:"

"Perhaps Chris is a little—envious," Isa suggested, and the old lady nodded thoughtfully, her bright eyes distant and absent for once.

"The idea is rather ironic," she said. "Chris Burrow& used to look down on Toby and now he's working for him One can understand a certain amount of resentment."

"Looked down on him?" The idea seemed so unlikely that Isa looked frankly curious. When she thought **back**, however, Chris's attitude towards Toby was one of derision as much as envy, and she had no doubt at all that he disliked him intensely.

The old lady was looking at her with narrowed eyes, her expression doubtful. "Perhaps you think me a garrulous and indiscreet old woman?" she

suggested, and Isa hastily shook her head to deny it, though she was given no chance to deny it verbally. "It's many years since I talked to anyone about such things, Isabella," she added quietly. "You are a very good listener, child."

"Nothing you tell me will ever be repeated," Isa assured her earnestly, and the old lady smiled briefly.

"I know, child, but it has been so long since I faced—certain things that I had almost forgotten them." For a moment her face was as gentle as only those stern features could be on occasion. "We took Toby from an orphanage when he was only a tiny baby, I and my husband," she said, almost as if she spoke to herself, and Isa's heart gave a great lurch of surprise as she stared at her. "That's why Chris Burrows always looked down on him, you see—he knew nothing about his background."

"I—I didn't know that," Isa whispered huskily. For a moment she wondered if the confidence had been rashly made and would be regretted later.

old people made slips that they later regretted, even such alert and intelligent ones as Lady Carmichael, and if that was so, then it might prove awkward for her later on, although the expression on the old lady's face gave no indication that she in any way deplored her moment of confidence.

"We've never made a secret of the fact that Toby was adopted," she went on in the same quiet voice, "but it's so long now that I think of myself as actually being his grandmother." She smiled briefly

and shook her head. "I was much too elderly at the time to be called Mama by a tiny child, and the compromise suited us all well enough."

"No wonder To—Mr. Carmichael's so fond of you," Isa told her, and saw the immediate tightening of those thin lips at the very suggestion of anything resembling sentiment.

"We get along well because we're both down-to-earth and thoroughly selfish," Lady Carmichael declared firmly. "Now for heaven's sake, child, don't become maudlin about things! Run along and make us some tea, before I expire from thirst!"

"Yes, my lady, of course!"

Isa was on her feet in a moment, willing enough to comply, but she got only as far as the door when Lady Carmichael called after her and she turned back. "Don't forget to speak to Toby about taking you into town with him," the old lady reminded her. "If you don't speak to him yourself I shall do so, and I know you'd hate that—you're an independent little minx!"

"MI ask him," Isa promised, and closed the door behind her, smiling as she crossed the hall towards the kitchen. Driving into Sherwell with Toby was something she looked forward to with surprising pleasure, and she did not even realise that one of her fingers was tracing the outline of her mouth as she walked into the kitchen.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHATEVER good intentions Toby might have had about getting someone to replace Mts. Grayle, he had so far been unsuccessful, and Isa had raised the point with him yet again when he came into the kitchen to enquire after her progress with dinner. There were signs of the inevitable glimmer of amusement lurking in his eyes, she felt sure, despite his quite serious explanation of the difficulties. It was not that she really minded cooking, but her chores in the kitchen meant that she could not give as much time to looking after the old lady, and she disliked the idea of neglecting her.

As it was Saturday Toby wore the more casual clothes he always did at week-ends and his presence in the kitchen was something that Isa found rather, unnerving, especially when he seemed to be in to hurry to depart. A pair of faded blue denims moulded the long length of his legs, then flared fashionably at the bottoms and he wore a shirt of the same material outside the trousers, the sleeves turned back into winged cuffs above strong wrists and hands.

His blue eyes regarded her for a moment speculating on the seriousness of her complaint, then he smiled and they crinkled at their corners. "You don't *really* mind, do you?" he asked from his perch on the end of the table, and Isa took a

moment to consider, a paring knife in one hand and a half-peeled potato in the other.

"I mind not being able to look after Lady Carmichael as I should," she told him. "I've no objection otherwise, Mr. Carmichael."

He nodded, apparently satisfied. "Good, because so far I haven't had much luck finding a temporary—it seems Mrs. Grayle's sort are thin on the ground these days, and unfortunately we have quite a reputation with the agency. Grandmama, bless her, has a disposition that runs through house-keepers like a hot knife through butter, which doesn't make things any easier."

"I can't think why anyone should find it hard to work for Lady Carmichael," Isa declared in defence of the old lady. "I get along very well with her, and so does Mrs. Grayle."

"True," Toby allowed with a smile, "but then you're a practised little dragon-tamer after years with Aunt Whatsit, aren't you, Isabella? And Grayle is a gem, in a class all on her own in this day and age, that's why I'm looking only for a temporary replacement for her." He looked at her for a moment with one brow raised, and Isa guessed what he was going to say next, although she could scarcely believe he was serious about it. "You wouldn't care to take on the job until Grayle comes back, would you?" he asked, and Isa shook her head firmly.

"No, thank you, Mr. Carmichael!"

"You're sure?" He sounded quite blatantly persuasive and Isa found it hard not to smile. "I'd give

you a lot more money for doing the extra work—are you sure I can't talk you into it?"

"You quite possibly could—in time," Isa admitted frankly "But I have no ambition to be a cook-housekeeper, Mr. Carmichael, and what's more, it's a trained. job, not one you can simply walk into without experience."

He held her gaze steadily for a moment, then smiled, a small, knowing smile that set her heart racing as she determinedly gave her attention to peeling the potatoes again. He lifted the corner of the tea towel covering a bowl of batter for Yorkshire pudding, and nodded. "Of course your Yorkshire pud isn't quite up to Grayle's standard," he remarked, "but you have a good line in sponge pudding that she can't compete with."

"Thank you !"

Her sarcasm earned no more than a brief grin, then he cocked a questioning brow at her as he sat facing her across the corner of the table. "Grand-mama says you have something you want to ask he said, and Isa frowned.

She would much rather Lady Carmichael had let her broach the subject in her own time, but now that the matter had been raised there was nothing she could do but ask him about taking her into Sherwell with him. "I'm having a whole day off," she began, and again that curious brow flicked upwards.

"Oh, are you?"

She had to admit that she had for the moment forgotten he was her employer in fact, but she had

considered Lady Carmichael's permission sufficient, since it most concerned her. "Lady Carmichael said it was all right for me to change two half-days for a whole one," she explained, and tilted her chin, looking at him through her lashes. "I didn't think it would matter to you !"

"It doesn't !" he assured her, and grinned when she showed signs of exasperation. "That wasn't what you were going to ask me, was it?"

"I'm going to do some shopping in Sherwell," Isa went on. "Lady Carmichael suggested that I asked you to take me, on your way to the office."

She had deliberately worded it so that he would not get the impression that the idea had been hers, and she knew from the way he looked at her that he guessed. His brows were raised and he was looking at her quizzically. "An idea you aren't altogether in favour of," he guessed, and Isa hastily went back to her potato peeling again.

"I would have been quite happy to go on the bus," she said, and he laughed.

"Little Miss Independence!" he jeered. "You'd wait hours for a bus than ask me to run you into town when I'm going anyway! Why, Isabella?"

"I didn't say that," Isa denied, gouging out the eyes from a potato with a certain malicious relish. "I would have asked you in time, as Lady Carmichael suggested it."

"But not if Grandmama hadn't suggested it?" he asked, and she shook her head.

"No, of course not, it wouldn't have occurred to me."

He leaned across the table suddenly and covered her two wet hands with one of his, the touch of his long, strong fingers sending little shivers through her that she fought hard to control. Then he bent his head and the blue eyes looked up into her face, glistening with amusement and a hint of challenge for her independence. "Well?" he prompted. "Ask me!"

Isa tried to withdraw from that disturbing grasp, but was cautious about struggling too hard because of the paring knife she still held, and her eyes were bright with resentment. "I don't *need* to ask you now," she told him. "You already know that I'm going into Sherwell and that Lady Carmichael thinks it would be a good idea for you to take me when you go to work, but I'm not going to beg, Mr. Carmichael!"

"No, of course you're not!" He spoke softly and Isa hastily lowered her eyes again before the expression she saw in his—a glowing warmth that did strange, inexplicable things to her heartbeat and made her catch her breath. "But what makes you so determined not to ask me, Isabella?"

"What makes *you* so determined to make me ask?" Isa retorted, and again he laughed.

"Oh, that's my autocratic blood coming out," he said, and she looked up swiftly, ready to use any means she could to best him, without even stopping to think.

"How do you know it's autocratic?" she _demanded.

The next few seconds were heavy with a silence

that could have been cut with a knife, and Isa would have given anything to recall those last few impulsive words. Toby released her hands slowly and sat back on the table, one foot swinging, his eyes narrowed, watching her face with those quite ridiculously long eyelashes casting dark shadows on to his high cheekbones, and it struck her for the first time that she had no idea whether his parentage was known to Lady Carmichael or not.

"So Chris Burrows has let the cat out of the bag, has he?" he asked, and Isa blinked.

"Chris?" she echoed.

Toby's eyes narrowed even further and he frowned, his head to one side, more curious than angry. "He always revelled in the fact that I was only an adopted grandson," he said, without a hint of bitterness. "I'm not surprised he decided to enlighten you as to the fact."

Isa shook her head. "Well, he hasn't, Mr. Carmichael," she told him quietly. "As a matter of fact Lady Carmichael told me the day before yesterday, she said it wasn't a secret."

"Neither is it," he agreed.

"And I wasn't—I didn't probe," she added hastily, and he smiled.

"No, I'll give you your due, you wouldn't," he allowed, and for a second he was silent again, seeming to give his full attention to the state of his shirt cuffs, his long hands restless suddenly. "Not that it matters," he said after a few moments. "I've been with Grandmama for so long now that I don't remember anything else, and as you say it's no

secret that I was adopted."

"I'm sorry." He looked up curiously when she apologised, as if he sought a reason for it, and she hastened to explain. "I mean, I shouldn't have made that—that remark about you knowing who you—I mean who your—"

"You really don't need to tie yourself into verbal knots trying to explain," Toby told her with a smile. "As it happens *I do* know who my parents were and I'm quite respectable, at least in the eyes of the law if not the family. Grandmama knew my mother, she was her goddaughter, and the youngest daughter of a duke, no less, but she married, shall we say—unwisely?—and died when I was born."

"Oh, I see!"

One dark brow questioned her reaction, and Isa wondered who and what the husband had been who had been considered such an unwise choice. "You're impressed by the idea of my blue blood?" Toby asked, and laughed. "Don't be, little one. When I was left in the cold, cold world alone they wouldn't even own me!"

"Oh, but that was cruel!" Ever impulsive in support of lost causes, Isa's sympathy was with the unfortunate baby in the story, and it did not yet occur to her that he was now the man who sat perched on the edge of the table opposite her. She dunked another potato into the bowl of water and began paring away thick layers of peel with fierce cuts of the knife. "I don't know how anyone could!"

"Isabella!" He was shaking his head and he put a hand on her wrist, slowing down her movements.

"It was nearly thirty-five years ago, child, you don't have to look so fierce about it. Not that I'm not touched by your concern for me!"

"Not for you !" Isabella denied. "For that poor baby!"

Suddenly he was laughing, a deep, full-throated sound that did strange things to her senses, although it aroused her anger. "Oh, Isabella," he said softly, when he had recovered enough to speak, "you're marvellous, you really are the limit !"

Before she realised his intention, he leaned across the table towards her and kissed her firmly, full on her mouth, and she instinctively closed her eyes, while the knife she had been using slid from her fingers as she unconsciously relaxed. She made a wild grab at it with one hand and the sharp blade nicked her palm as she clutched it, making her cry out in pain.

She stared in dismay for a moment at the blood that ran from the wound, but before she could recover herself, Toby hastily slid from the table and gripped her wrist firmly, then with his other hand in the small of her back, propelled her towards the kitchen sink. He turned on the full force of the cold water tap, then thrust her hand under it, and she bit her lip at the sudden feeling of nausea that churned in her stomach when the chill stung the cut flesh sharply.

For several seconds Toby's strong fingers on her wrist held her arm steady in the stream of the water, and even in those circumstances she was made aware of the warmth of his body as she leaned back

against him. After a few moments he -drew back her hand and leaned forward to look at the cut, bringing his face so close to hers that their cheeks brushed as he looked over her shoulder.

"It's not too bad," he told her confidently, and his words breathed warmly against her neck, stirring the dark hair and sending a shiver of response along her spine. "I'll put a plaster on it and you won't even feel it!"

"Thank you." She had difficulty in finding her voice and his proximity was as much to blame as the slight feeling of shock induced by the accident, she had to admit it.

The blue eyes looked at her from only inches away, and even now that faint hint of laughter lurked in their depths. "You think I'm an unfeeling brute, don't you?" he guessed. "But it *was* the best treatment, believe me."

"I—I didn't think anything of the kind," Isa denied, and shivered again when his laughter warmed her skin. She looked at the now almost invisible cut on her hand and wished it felt as well as it looked. "It still hurts," she said, without realising quite how plaintive she sounded.

"That's the air getting to it," Toby told her with easy assurance. "I'll put a plaster on it and you'll find it feels much better."

Mrs. Grayle kept a first-aid box in the kitchen and Toby soon found disinfectant and 'plasters while Isa sat on a chair, a strange mixture of emotions churning away inside her as she watched him surreptitiously from the concealment of her lashes.

He was unbelievably gentle as he dressed the cut and she tried not to respond to the light, firm touch of those long fingers.

While he was bent over her hand his head was only inches away and a curious curling sensation in her stomach made her want to reach out with her other hand and touch the thick dark hair with her fingers. It was an almost irresistible urge and she shook her head hastily, quickly averting her gaze when he looked up at last.

The glimmer of laughter in his eyes as he held her hand in his still and looked at her steadily might easily have meant that he guessed how she was feeling and was not averse to the idea. "I must remember not to kiss you while you have a knife in your hand," he said, and laughed. "I suppose I'm lucky you didn't decide to defend your honour with it!"

"One kiss is hardly reason to defend my honour, as you put it," Isa told him as coolly as she could for a shaking voice. "You attach too much importance, to it, Mr. Carmichael!"

Thby said nothing for the moment, but straightened up his long length and carefully put away the first aid box before coming back to stand in front of her, his hands on his hips and his feet apart in a curiously aggressive attitude. "Do you feel up to doing the rest of the dinner," he asked, "or would it be poetic justice if I carried on under your supervision?"

Isa got to her feet, shaking her head vehemently. Being closeted in the kitchen with him for the next

hour or so was an experience she could well do without, she felt, and she would certainly never have the nerve to instruct him in the art of peeling potatoes. "I can manage, thank you," she told him "There isn't much else to do, and I'd rather do it on my own."

He shrugged, and it was obvious that he was no more enamoured of the idea than she was herself. "If you're quite sure," he said, and Isa nodded.

"I'm quite sure, Mr. Carmichael, thank you."

"O.K." He thrust his hands into the pockets of the blue denims and turned to go, looking back from the doorway with a smile on his lips. "If you have any more accidents with the cutlery," he said, "just shout and I'll come running!"

It was too much to resist and Isa stuck out her chin as she looked across at him, the potato knife already in her hand again. "If you hadn't been here there wouldn't have been an accident at all!" she told him pertly, and he laughed.

"*Touché*, little one," he said. "I'll remember that! "

Isa half hoped that Toby would forget about taking her into Sherwell one day, although she would have to admit that if he did she would have been disappointed. She should have known that Lady Carmichael would make sure that neither of them forgot, and sure enough, one evening just after Isa had served dinner to them all, the old lady raised the subject, quite out of the blue.

"It's tomorrow that you're doing your shopping,

isn't it, Isabella?" she asked, and Isa glanced almost involuntarily at Toby as she replied.

"Yes, my lady."

"And have you arranged with Toby to take you?" the old lady insisted, while Toby caught Isa's eye *briefly and lowered one lid in a broad wink.*

"The subject has been mentioned in passing, Grandmama," he said, being quite unnecessarily precise in Isa's opinion. "Nothing definite's been decided, I'm waiting for Isabella to make up her mind."

"About going?" his grandmother asked with a puzzled frown, and he looked at Isa, his eyes glinting wickedly.

"About asking me properly about taking her," he said.

"Well, of course you'll *take her!*" Lady Carmichael declared adamantly, before Isa had a chance to speak for herself. "There's no earthly reason why you shouldn't, Toby, and you can also bring her back with you when you come home in the evening. It's unthinkable that you would refute !"

Toby's blue eyes looked across at her and he lowered one lid in a broad wink. "Darling, did you ever know me refuse a pretty girl anything?" he asked, and the old lady nodded her satisfaction.

"Then it is arranged, child," she told Isa, and nodded her head, as if she was well pleased with her arrangements.

Isa was still not happy about leaving Lady Car-

michael alone all day, despite assurances about arrangements being made, and she suggested that she should return at lunch time instead, but the old lady would not hear of it. She simply asked for a light lunch to be left ready for her on a tray and informed Isa that Chris Burrows would be looking in from time to time during the day, to see that all was well with her.

The identity of her stand-in was something of a surprise to Isa and it was evident enough to cause the old lady to comment. "You surely trust Christopher Burrows with my safety!" she remarked brusquely when Isa stared at her. "You of all people should trust him, Isabella!"

"Oh, but of course I trust him, my lady," Isa assured her hastily, and the old lady nodded.

"So I should hope!" she said firmly. "I have known him since he was a child and I have no reason to suppose that he will murder me in my chair while you are out shopping, you foolish child!"

"No, of course not, I never even thought of such a thing!" Isa hastily amended any wrong impression she had given. "I just don't like leaving you all day with no one in the house, that's all, my lady. With Mrs. Grayle away as well, and Chris won't be—"

"He'll be in to see me every hour until you come back," Lady Carmichael said impatiently. "For heaven's sake, child, don't fuss so I "

Isa gave an inward sigh of resignation and wondered if that indomitable spirit would ever succumb to the more usual frailties of old age. "No, my

lady," she said.

Satisfied that she had quelled any last-minute doubts about leaving her, Lady Carmichael gave her attention to the dress Isa had changed into after cooking breakfast. "You're going in that dress?" she asked, and Isa looked down at it anxiously.

"I thought it seemed suitable," she said, "but if you think it's too—"

"It's perfectly suitable," Lady Carmichael assured her, and Isa sighed her relief.

It was her best linen dress and she had thought it most appropriate for a day's shopping, although perhaps a bit evocative for the company of her employer when he drove her into town. Its deep blue colour lent depth to her violet eyes and a soft sheen to her lightly tanned skin, but the neck was cut rather lower than anything else she owned and the shape of dress followed her own curves lovingly. A silk scarf knotted round her throat flowed down and partly hid the décolletage, but she had wondered about it being too low.

It was a dress she had scarcely worn before, partly Aunt Carrie had disapproved of it, although it was evident that Lady Carmichael did not share her view. She was nodding her head in a way that implied approval and there was even a slight upward curve to her thin lips. "You have excellent taste, Isabella," she told her, and Isa smiled gratefully.

"Thank you, my lady, I only hope I can find something as good in Sherwell," she said, and the old lady pursed her lips.

"Ah, you're buying dresses," she said, and Isa nodded agreement. "Then you should have Toby's help, he has impeccable taste in women's clothes, though not always in women!"

The confidence was a little embarrassing, and Isa would rather the remark had not been made, for she did not feel capable of providing an answer. "I—I rather think Mr. Carmichael has several appointments, my lady," she told her. "And I can manage very well on my own."

Whatever opinion had been forthcoming was cut short by Toby's appearance in the door of the , and Isa actually felt glad to see him in this instance. He too gave the blue dress an approving scrutiny and smiled. "I hoped you weren't going out for the day in that little shift you cooked breakfast in," he told her with his customary frankness. "That's much better!"

Isa thought the old lady smiled, but she was too busy controlling the sudden increase in her pulse rate to really notice, and she picked up her

from a chair and went towards the door. "Toby " The old lady's voice rang out across the big room clearly. "If you're not too busy during the day you could meet Isabella and give her lunch—I'm certain she will neglect to have, any at all if you don't!"

Toby glanced first at Isa, his eyes glittering with amusement at her obvious embarrassment, then at the old lady sitting straight and upright in her chair and apparently oblivious of having embarrassed anyone. "Your wish is my command, dear heart,"

he told her extravagantly as he followed Isa to the door. He looked down at her with his glittering blue eyes suggesting all manner of things. "Shall we go, Isabella?" he asked.

He put a hand under her arm as they went across the hall and the gesture had a curiously possessive air about it that set Isa's heart rapping hard against her ribs, and made her legs feel quite alarmingly weak as she tried to keep pace with his long stride. The front door was already open and, as they approached, it opened further and admitted Chris Burrows.

It was debatable who was most surprised, Isa or Chris, but while she recovered enough to smile after a moment or two, his gauntly good-looking face showed frank dislike at seeing her with Toby, and that suggestively possessive hand on her arm, and he frowned. "Good morning, Isa," he said, and managed to convey his dislike in the cool greeting.

Isa had mentioned her shopping trip to him, but said nothing about Toby driving her there and back and she could imagine that he saw her silence as a deliberate deception. "I've left Lady Carmichael's lunch on the table beside her chair, Chris," she informed him quietly, seeking to keep everything matter-of-fact. "You're coming in to see her during the day, aren't you?"

"That's right." He looked from Isa to Toby's blandly unconcerned expression and his frown deepened. "I didn't know you were going out for the day," he said. "At least I didn't realise just what you were doing." Again he looked at Toby and his

feelings were obvious in the look of frank dislike. "I hope you have a good time," he said.

Isa felt the colour in her face and it was partly due to the interested gaze that Toby fixed her with, watching to see how she explained things to Chris's satisfaction, she thought. If only they had been a moment or two sooner leaving the house then she need not have been forced into this uneasy confrontation.

"I'm only shopping," she told him, trying to ease her arm from Toby's hold without appearing too obvious about it. "Nothing very exciting, but it's a long time since I bought new clothes."

"I see!"

Toby's fingers tightened on her arm and she tried hard to think of something to say that did not sound as if she was making excuses for herself. Chris Burrows really had no right to object to her going out for the day, even if she had been going with Toby, but she hated to have him think she was spending the day with the man he disliked so much, and had kept deliberately quiet about it.

Her eyes searched his face for some sign of encouragement and she ventured a smile. "I'll see you tomorrow, I expect, Chris," she said, and he nodded.

"I expect so," he said, and strode off across the hall. He had not, she realised as she watched him go, even spoken a civil good morning to his employer and she wondered if he hated Toby as much as he seemed to.

"O.K.?" Toby asked, close to her ear, and Isa brought herself swiftly back to earth.

"Yes," she said, "I'm O.K."

Having spent most of her life in London, Isa found the more easy-going pace of the country town quite a change, and she enjoyed looking round what few dress shops there were and making up her mind what to buy. She could afford two at least, perhaps three if she was very extravagant, but she took her time making up her mind.

It was something of a distraction from the job in hand to know that she was having lunch with Toby, and she tried to put it to the back of her mind as she looked at dresses, not always *successfully*. It was becoming increasingly disturbing, the effect that Toby could have on her, and she was unsure whether she liked the sensation or not.

There was no doubt he was a very attractive man, but he was also fully aware of the fact, and even Lady Carmichael had implied that he had a fondness for women that was more generous than discreet. There would be no future for a girl so much than he was and also his employee, except in the obvious way that she was not prepared to accept.

She sighed deeply and audibly, then hastily looked at the elderly woman who was showing her a selection of dresses and smiled. A green tricol one with soft pleats was tempting, but she was very undecided between that and a deep blue one that lent colour to her eyes.

"I'll take the green one, please," she decided on impulse, and the woman nodded her satisfaction,

then went away to wrap it for her.

While she was gone, Isa walked down the rows of dresses again and passed the time by looking again at dresses she had looked at already a dozen times or more. It was while she was so occupied, out of sight of the main part of the shop, that she heard a vaguely familiar voice and frowned curiously trying to think where she had heard it before.

It was a quiet, almost sulky voice, but it had a distinctive husky tone, and Isa remembered suddenly where she had heard it before. After sitting in the outer office of Toby Carmichael's chambers on the day of her interview, listening to a woman berating him bitterly, he had emerged suddenly, accompanied by the woman. Only by then she was pleading with him about something, in the same slightly sulky, husky-toned voice Isa was hearing now.

Curiosity had to be satisfied, and without hesitation Isa parted the hanging dresses and peered between them at the owner of the voice. There was no mistaking it was the same woman—the slim figure and long slender legs, the same dark-haired Sylvia that Toby had so abruptly dismissed from his office because he had an appointment to see Isa.

Isa turned hastily and concealed the peephole she had made for herself when the assistant returned with her purchase, smiling her thanks and holding out her hand for her change to be counted into it. Above the sound of the assistant's voice counting, she heard the dark woman's voice again, informing

the girl who was serving her that she had to hurry because she had a luncheon appointment, and the amount of satisfaction she put into the statement made it obvious that it was one she had no intention of breaking.

Whether recognition would be mutual was doubtful, but Isa preferred not to be seen by the other woman and she breathed a sigh of relief when she managed to leave the shop without being noticed, wondering who it was that the elegant and emotional Sylvia was so looking forward to meeting this time.

A glance at her wristwatch told her that it was only a very short time . to her appointment with Toby for lunch, and she made her way to the restaurant they had agreed on with that odd little curling sensation in her stomach again at the prospect. She really must do something about her all too impressionable heart, or Toby Carmichael would cause her more pain than she could cope with.

It was a much grander restaurant than she would have chosen herself, but no doubt Toby was accustomed to lunching in such style and she could haftly object in the circumstances. She smiled at the head waiter when he came towards her and asked for Mr. Carmichael's table, as Toby had told her to, looking at the man with wide, puzzled eyes when he shook his head.

"I'm sorry, madame," he told her, "but Mr. Carmichael rang to say that he's been delayed with an unexpected client and will you excuse him this time. He hopes you'll lunch alone here at the table he's reserved."

Isa looked around at the expensive decor and the smooth, confident faces of business men and secretaries and shook her head. She felt small, vulnerable and very let down and she had the most awful feeling that she was going to burst into tears, which was quite ridiculous in the circumstances.

Then she remembered the husky confident voice of the woman called Sylvia, announcing to the assistant in the dress shop that she had a luncheon appointment, and she was quite sure in her own mind suddenly who was Toby's important and unexpected client. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but she had absolutely no doubt that her guess was right. Toby had preferred to choose his own luncheon partner, rather than be inveigled into taking his grandmother's companion, and he had discreetly cried off.

She realised suddenly that the waiter was watching her, waiting for her to make up her mind to follow him to the table Toby had suggested she should use, but she shook her head. Nothing would induce her to eat there alone, especially, as she , Toby was known there.

"I—I won't stay, thank you," she said in a small tight voice. "I'll—" She bit her lip and turned quickly, hurrying off without another word, out into the sunny street again, her eyes bright with mingled anger and self-pity, and hating Toby Carmichael more than any man in the world at that moment.

Her cheeks burned brightly pink and she grew more angry as she made her way towards the bus

station. Nothing was further from her mind than finding another restaurant, nor was she in the mood for any more shopping, so the only thing to do was to return to Trent House and let Toby guess why she did not turn up at the office to drive home with him.

Never again would she allow Lady Carmichael or anyone else to arrange dates for her, and that way Toby would not be put to the inconvenience of having to invent clients, so that he could take his latest conquest to lunch. For no good reason, as she rode home on the bus, she thought' about Chris suddenly, and his declaration of love for her. If she had any sense at all she would fall in love •with Chris, and leave men like Toby Carmichael strictly alone, only such a vow would probably prove much easier to make than to keep.

CHAPTER SIX

Isa was helpless to do- anything about the nervous thudding of her heart against her ribs when she heard Toby's car draw up outside, although she had already decided that she did not really owe him an apology for what she had done. A brief explanation was all he was entitled to in the circumstances, she felt. A few words to convey the fact that she had not felt inclined to wait around for him would be sufficient, although now that he was actually there the-idea seemed somehow less appealing.

He was bound to guess that her true reason had to do with his not turning up for their luncheon date, but he would expect her to accept his story of an unexpected client, and her own excuses seemed to sound very flimsy suddenly. Lady Carmichael had shown both surprise and curiosity When she arrived back so early and alone, but she had told her nothing of Toby's ignorance about her change of plan. That Toby himself would enlighten her was in no doubt, and then heaven knew what she would have to say about it.

Isa, with unexpected time on her hands, had set about preparing a cooked dinner instead of the cold meat and salad she had left. It seemed in some way to salve her conscience, although she stubbornly refused to admit that there was any cause for the

little niggling sense of guilt she felt. It also gave her something to do instead of spending the time waiting anxiously for Toby to return and tell her exactly what he thought of her idea of revenge.

She was stirring last-minute seasonings into a casserole when she heard the front door close with a bang that shook the whole house, and she flinched. Listening anxiously she heard the sitting-room door close a few seconds later, only slightly less violently, but at least he had gone in to see his grandmother first as he always did, and she thanked heaven for a few moments' respite.

Nervously active, she checked on a saucepan of potatoes, and yet again peered into the oven at the simmering casserole, then spun round quickly when the kitchen door opened, her heart pounding heavily as she gazed at Toby with wary eyes. He paused for a second in the doorway and his eyes were bright with what must surely be anger in the circumstances, then he closed the door slowly and carefully and came across the kitchen towards her.

He came to a stop some ten or twelve inches in front of her, his hands turned backwards on his hips, pushing back his jacket in his favourite stance. Standing like that, with his feet slightly apart and his head thrust forward, he looked hostile and aggressive, but also oddly disturbing too, so that Isa hastily turned away and back to the cooker.

"All right," Toby said quietly, "explain!"

Isa found it much too difficult to look at him direct, so she kept her eyes on the contents of the

saucepan, as if she found them too fascinating to leave. "I—I decided to come back early," she said, and was dismayed to hear how feeble her excuse sounded.

Toby raised his eyes to heaven in silent appeal. "I had gathered that much," he told her sarcastically. "But would it have been too much trouble to let me know what you were up to?" There was simply no answer to that, so Isa just shook her head. "Then why," he insisted in the same quiet voice, "didn't you say something?"

"I'm sorry." An apology was due, she was ready to admit that now that she looked at it in retrospect and less emotionally, but a simple apology was apparently not enough for Toby. He was shaking his head and rubbing one hand over the back of his hair in a gesture of exasperation that was all too familiar.

"Oh, I don't doubt you're sorry now," he allowed, "but what I don't get is why you went off like that without saying a word, when you knew damned well that I'd be waiting to drive you home. You can't have forgotten—I won't believe that, so what was your reason?"

Pink-flushed from the heat of the cooker and feeling rather as if she had been cornered, Isa looked at him at last, but only long enough to register the fact that he looked more angry than she had ever seen him, and it gave his features a dismaying suggestion of cruelty. "I—I *did* forget," she said, and he gave a harsh snort of disbelief as she turned back to the cooker.

"I don't believe it !" he declared quietly but firmly, and she cried out, as much in surprise as hurt, when his fingers closed on the upper part of her arm and he swung her right round to face him, his grip strong enough to make her wince. "You're being too cagey by half, my girl," he told her, his eyes searching her face for betraying signs, "and I'm curious to know why. I don't relish being left standing by a little half-pint like you, so give me one good reason why I shouldn't give you a rocket! Leaving me waiting around for three-quarters of an hour!"

Isa blinked for a moment, a hasty glance at her watch confirming the fact that he was indeed far later than she had realised. "I didn't realise you'd wait for me that long," she told him, 'and he laughed shortly.

"What did you expect me to do, for heaven's sake?" he demanded. "Just give you a five-minute deadline and then drive back without you? I know what women are when they're shopping, and I gave you plenty of scope—but three-quarters of an hour !" He stook his head, his eyes narrowed as he looked at her steadily. "Do you know," he told her more quietly, "I do believe you're the first female who ever stood me up, and I'm hopping mad, Isa—I don't like the experience!"

Isa could well imagine how he felt, but her own experience stung her into self-defence and she stuck out her chin, her eyes bright and challenging in her flushed face. "Well, I don't like being left standing either!" she told him shortly, and he looked at her

narrowly for a moment, as if he was genuinely puzzled.

"Lunch time?" he asked, and Isa nodded. "But didn't Ernest give you my message when you went to the restaurant?"

"Yes, he did!"

"Then you'll know I had an unexpected appointment!"

"I know what the waiter told me," she said, and managed to convey her opinion by the tone of her voice, so that Toby looked at her again narrow-eyed.

"Are you by any chance trying to tell me something?" he asked quietly.

Momentarily at a loss for words now that it came to the opportunity she had expected to relish, Isa hesitated. Somehow the prospect of telling him that she knew all about the identity of his unexpected client was much less satisfying than she had anticipated, and she licked her lips anxiously.

"I—I was angry," she said, delaying the moment as long as possible, and one dark brow questioned her reasons, but he remained silent. "I was angry because I know—I know who your unexpected client was."

She waited for him to look taken aback, perhaps even a little guilty, but instead he merely looked curious. His expression suggested that he questioned her source of information, but he looked quite unperturbed otherwise, and that disturbed her. "I can't imagine how you got to know the identity of my client," he told her quietly, "but it really

doesn't matter whether you know or not, although you seem to think it's significant in some way." The blue eyes studied her for a moment and they were curious but not evasive. "Should I know what you're trying to get at?" he asked.

It was quite evident to Isa by now that something was wrong with her own conclusions and she felt her heart fluttering anxiously as she tried a last desperate effort to make him admit that the dark woman was the reason he had broken their lunch date. "I—I saw that woman in the dress shop," she said, *licking her dry lips and unable to meet his eyes*. "I *heard* her!"

It was plain that her explanation, however garbled and confusing, conveyed some suspicion to him, but he merely looked more impatient than ever. "Am, I supposed to show surprise that you saw another woman in a dress shop?" he enquired quietly, and Isa shook her head, convinced now that she had made a complete and utter fool of herself by jumping to conclusions.

"I'm sorry," she murmured in confusion, and turned back to the cooker, a move that was brought to an abrupt halt by the grip on her arm.

His eyes had a bright, glittering look that promised little mercy for her slip and she bit her lip again anxiously as she tried to think of a reasonable cause for her supposition, for he would surely demand one. "That's not good enough," Toby said softly, and his fingers squeezed gently into her soft flesh as if in warning. "You still haven't explained why you walked out on me instead of waiting for

me to drive you home. I'm not in the habit of waiting around for hours for little girls who simply can't be bothered to tell me when they've changed their minds."

"I've said I'm sorry," Isa insisted, trying to prise herself free. "Please let go my arm, Mr. Carmichael, you're hurting me!"

"Any minute now I'm going to get angry enough to shake you," Toby warned quietly. "You're the most exasperating female I've ever had the misfortune to meet, Isabella, but I'll get some sort of sensible explanation out of you even if I have to keep you here all night—do you understand?" Isa nodded cautiously. "Then **talk**, woman, before I lose my temper!"

Again Isa's tongue slid nervously over her lips and she glanced up at him through her lashes, wary of making him even more angry with her explanation. "There was a woman in your office the day I came for my interview," she said. "You were quarrelsome—disagreeing about something, and—"

!". Sylvia Newhurst," Toby interrupted quietly, nodding as if he understood at last, although he sounded perfectly matter-of-fact about it. "No one else ever has the cheek to invade my business hours but where does she come into it?"

"I—I remember you called her Sylvia," Isa agreed, and Toby's brows rose curiously.

"You saw her in the dress shop?" he prompted. "Am I supposed to read something significant into that?"

Isa shook her head helplessly, finding it harder

and harder to go on. That cool, ruthless gaze promised to extract the last ounce of satisfaction from her confession and she had never felt more defensively vulnerable in her life. "I recognised her," she went on. "I mean, I realised it was the same woman, and she was—she was telling the assistant that she had an appointment for lunch that she was anxious to keep."

"So?" The prodding was relentless and Isa began to rebel against it, even though she could see his reason for being angry.

"So, in the circumstances, I assumed it was you that she was seeing for lunch!" she said shortly. "I remembered how—how—" She waved her hands helplessly to indicate her meaning. "Oh, you know what I mean! I just couldn't see her being so smug about meeting anyone but you, that's all!"

Toby's eyes glittered and his mouth hinted at a smile as he cocked one brow at her. "I think I'm flattered," he told her quietly. "Although I don't take quite so kindly to the idea of being thought of as a double-dealer—like you're suggesting!"

Isa bit her lip anxiously, convinced at last that whoever it was that Toby had seen for lunch it had not been the mysterious Sylvia. "I thought you—I simply assumed that you preferred to take her to lunch instead of having to take me because your—because Lady Carmichael had more or less made you promise to," she told him in a breathless rush of words.

Toby said nothing for a second or two but looked down at her with a strangely unfathomable look in

his blue eyes, then he shook his head slowly, a hint of smile touching his mouth with that full, sensual lower lip. "I needed_ no prodding from Grandmama to take you to lunch," he said at last quietly. "As for standing you up in favour of someone else, you do yourself an injustice, Isa, you must know that, surely."

Isa's heart was thudding wildly in her breast and her head too was full of its pounding beat as she sought for some form of distraction to diminish the incredible feeling of excitement he aroused in her suddenly. She hastily turned and lifted the lid of the saucepan with her free hand and gazed down at the contents without really seeing anything at all.

"I—I really thought you had a previous appointment with Miss Newhurst," she said in a small husky voice. "And I—"

"Mrs. Newhurst, in fact," Toby interrupted softly, his eyes glittering. "You know what an unprincipled devil I am!"

Isa ignored the provocation he offered and merely shook her head. "I thought you'd left that message with the waiter rather than tell Lady Carmichael you didn't want to take me, when she was so insistent," she went on. "I didn't know—"

She bit her lip hard when he turned her back to face him, gently but insistently, and he studied her for a moment in silence, then smiled. "Did you really believe that?" he asked, and Isa nodded, her voice caught in her throat. He let go her arm and ran his fingers down the length of her flushed cheek and her neck, down to the low-cut neck of the blue

dress, a touch that shivered through her like fire as she fought with a sudden sense of elation that was quite uncontrollable.

"You little idiot!" he said softly, and an arm around her waist drew her close against him. His mouth just touched hers with that soft, teasing lightness she remembered had been a prelude to a much more passionate caress and she closed her eyes, not even pretending she objected.

Before the warm fierceness of his mouth could completely overwhelm her, however, the jangling sound of a bell shattered the quiet of the big kitchen as it had done before, and Isa started back guiltily. They both turned and looked up at the board above the door where the sitting-room bell jiggled back and forth insistently—then Toby laughed.

His laughter startled her almost as much as the sound of the bell had done initially and she stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, her heart pounding heavily and the first faint chill of realisation dawning on her when she saw the glittering look in his eyes as he bent and planted a brief, warm kiss on her mouth.

"Saved by the bell again !" he laughed, and shook his head. "I must do something about Grand mama's indiscriminate ringing of bells," he decided, and looked down at Isa again.

Her cheeks were hotly pink, but the brightness of her eyes owed itself to resentment rather than excitement, although her heart was still responding to that first wild surge of emotion he had aroused in

her. She turned back to the cooker, grateful for its heat to cover the reason for her colour, and the sound of his laughter was mockery to her sensitive ears.

"Shall I go and tell her that dinner's on its way?" he suggested from somewhere in the region of her right ear, and Isa nodded, not venturing a look at him.

"It'll be about ten minutes," she said, trying to steady a voice that sounded far too quavery for her liking.

She felt the warm pressure of his body against her back for a brief moment and his mouth gently brushed her neck, his voice warm against her ear again. "I forgive you for keeping me waiting," he murmured, and was turned and gone before Isa could deliver the retort that came instinctively to her lips. Watching that broad back disappear

the door into the hall, she shook her head impatiently as she turned back to her cooking. Her vow to keep clear of men like Toby Carmichael, she thought ruefully, had already been undermined there had been little she could do about it.

Although she had no way of being absolutely certain. Isa suspected that Toby had made little or no effort to find a temporary cook-housekeeper to replace Mrs. Grayle since their discussion of the matter some time ago, and the fact that her salary for the previous month had been considerably increased suggested that he was satisfied with things as they were. He had apparently chosen to ignore

the fact that she had said she did not want the post, even temporarily, despite an increase in salary, but she was not altogether surprised. Toby Carmichael was a man who just made things happen his way when they did not automatically do so.

She had casually mentioned that she was standing in for Mrs. Grayle to Chris Burrows once and he had been as indignant as if it involved himself, curling his strong hands into fists as if he would have liked to use them on the man he disliked so much.

That drive into town with Toby still rankled with Chris, although the fact that she had returned early and alone had seemed to please him despite the fact that he had no idea why. He was, Isa decided, a strange and complex man and not a very happy one, something she did her best to remedy without actually encouraging his declared love for her.

She still spent most of her free time with him, and she sat with him now beside the river, the trees behind them giving shade from the heat of the day and dappling the surface of the water with restless shafts of sunlight. It was always so peaceful by the river and Chris was an easy companion in certain circumstances like now.

She glanced at him now from the concealment of her lashes and remembered Lady Carmichael's opinion of him. To see him as self-pitying was possibly a harsh view, but she often saw signs of resentment in his manner which indicated a dissatisfaction with the order of things, and she regretted his inability to be content.

She had never mentioned that she knew he was a gardener-handyman and not a gamekeeper as he had claimed, but she suspected he must know that by now either Toby or Lady Carmichael must have enlightened her. It was something they never mentioned although Chris had once remarked that he enjoyed gardening, and the gardens were certainly a credit to him.

He looked comfortable and relaxed, as he usually was out there with her, and he reached out lazily with one hand and lightly touched her cheek. "You look so right here," he told her quietly. "You fit in perfectly with your surroundings."

Isa turned and smiled at him over her shoulder, her eyes heavy-lidded and lazy. "You told me that the very first time I met you," she reminded him. "I thought it was rather a nice compliment."

"It's true," Chris assured her earnestly. "I simply can't imagine you as a town girl at all." A caressing hand gently brushed the hair back from her neck, stroking her soft skin lightly, as if just touching her gave him some aesthetic pleasure, and Isa instinctively closed her eyes on the sensation it created. "You're lovely," he whispered, and leaned across to kiss the side of her neck.

Suddenly and disturbingly reminded of Toby's kisses, Isa eased herself out of reach, and she heard Chris's sigh of disappointment with a twinge of conscience. It was so easy to hurt him, but she felt far too lazy and relaxed to have to suddenly cope with his inevitable follow-through if she did not discourage him.

"I'm sorry, Chris." She looked at him a little contritely. "But you know how I feel—I—"

"I know," Chris said shortly, and sat upright beside her, his hands clasped around his knees. He had that set, unhappy look on his face again and Isa felt so guilty about being responsible for it, but there was nothing else she could do if she was to be honest with him. "I'm sorry, Isa!" He stared straight out at the sparkling surface of the river and the knuckles of his clasped hands were white and taut. "I simply forget, that's all. Being out here with you, it isn't easy to behave as if I feel no more for you than I would any other girl."

Isa looked at the good-looking face for a moment, curious, suddenly, about his experience with other girls. She remembered those veiled hints of Toby's and wondered for the first time just what had been behind them. "Don't you have another girl?" she asked, as lightly as she could, and Chris said nothing for a moment.

He sat with his hands clasped still about his legs and gazed at the river, almost as if he had

she was there, then he turned his head and looked at her squarely for a second before he spoke. "Hasn't Mr. Carmichael enlightened you?" he asked harshly.

Isa shook her head, already regretting her curiosity. "It seems reasonable that you'd have other girl-friends," she told him quietly. She laughed lightly and uneasily, as if it was of little

. "I don't really know very much about you, do I?" she asked, and a shrug of his shoulders ad-

mitted it.

"I suppose not," he allowed, and looked down at his hands, a small frown drawing his brows together. "It's only fair, I suppose, to give you the full facts about me since I want to marry you."

Isa's heart skipped a beat at the casual mention of marriage, although she should have thought of that before. If he was as serious about her as he professed to be then he almost certainly had marriage in mind, it had simply not occurred to her until now.

"I—I hadn't thought about marriage," she confessed, and Chris looked at her with narrowed eyes.

"I can't think what else you thought I had in mind," he said.

"Oh, Chris, please!" She reached out with one hand and touched his arm, and immediately he covered it with one of his own, his fingers curling strongly over hers.

For several moments he sat like that, not looking at her nor at the river either now, but down at his feet, as if he needed to think without any sort of distraction. "There was a girl once," he said slowly at last. "I thought—I wondered if Carmichael had told you about her; it would have been just like him to have done." When Isa made no comment, he went on, in the same quiet but rough-edged voice, not looking at her.

"Toby Carmichael was responsible for ending things with her," he said, the bitterness he felt betrayed in his voice. "She was pretty. Though not as lovely as you," he added hastily, "and for some

reason best known to him, he broke up our relationship—shattered the whole thing beyond repair, there was nothing I could do to fight him. Money always talks eventually, no matter who's involved."

Isa looked at him, not quite believing she heard him aright, although she knew him well enough to realise he wasn't joking. "Do you mean Toby—seduced her?" she asked, finding the words difficult to say, and Chris stared at her for a moment before shaking his head, his upper lip curled into a sneer of contempt.

"Good lord, no!" he said as if such a thing was unthinkable. "She was only a village girl!"

Something in his tone made Isa look at him curiously. He did not sound as if he was speaking about a girl he had once been in love with, which was what he was implying. There was a suggestion of condescension in the way he described the girl that fell strangely on her ears in the circumstances, and made her strangely uneasy.

"Then--how?" she asked, unable to stem her curiosity, and again she saw his lip curl in derision.

"He paid for her to go to a domestic college in London," he informed her. "I know it was generally thought that the old lady was responsible, but I know it was that—" He shook his head on whatever adjectives he had been going to use, and his hands were curled tightly into fists. "Her father worked for her ladyship for a time, so no one saw anything untoward in the girl being sent to college at her expense, but I knew better!"

"But why?" Isa asked, genuinely puzzled. "I

mean, why would Toby go to the expense and trouble of paying for the education of a girl he had no interest in?"

For a moment Chris did not answer, but she watched his gaunt, good-looking face through her lashes and saw the bitterness that made it so much less attractive. His mouth was tight and hard and his eyes narrowed as if he could still hate more easily than like the man who employed him. "He didn't like anyone else playing his game," he said at last in a taut and bitter voice. "Types like Toby Carmichael prefer to be the only fish in the pond!"

It was all too deep and confusing for Isa and she shook her head slowly as she plucked a stem of grass and put it to her mouth. "I don't profess to understand what it's all about," she confessed, and looked at him for a moment in silence. "I don't think I want to know either," she decided at last. "I don't like being involved in other people's personal affairs, Chris, and if it's all over between you and that girl—"

"It is!" he insisted harshly. "Long ago, Isa, believe me!"

She put her hand on his arm again, seeking to restore something of the tranquillity that had existed before the subject had been raised. "Then let's forget about it, shall we," she suggested, and waited anxiously while he considered the suggestion.

After a long moment of silence he bent his head suddenly and raised her hand to his mouth, pressing his lips firmly to her fingers. "I care only about

you now," he said in a throatily emotional voice as he laid his cheek against her captive hand. "I love you, Isa, as I never have before, and I want to marry you!"

"But, Chris—" She bit her lip hard, anxious not to hurt him, to make him more bitter than he was about the girl he had mentioned, but seeing no other way if she was to keep things straight between them. "I—I can't marry you," she ventured, and looked at him anxiously. "I really wish I could say I will, but—"

"But you don't fancy marrying the servant when _you can have the master!" he guessed harshly, and Isa started back in surprise at the bitterness in his voice. Seeing her wide, unbelieving eyes, he was immediately contrite and turned and pulled her into his arms, holding her tight against him as if by doing so he could erase those last angry words from her mind. "Isa, Isa !" he whispered against her ear, his hands stroking her shoulders anxiously. "I didn't mean that, my darling, I didn't mean it !"

Affected by his show of emotion, despite her surprise, Isa closed her eyes for a moment and allowed herself to relax against him, although she made no other response. "There's nothing like that at all between us—Mr. Carmichael and me," she told him, her voice muffled against his shoulder. "You're wrong to suppose there ever will be, Chris."

For a moment he simply held her tight and said nothing, then he eased his hold on her a little and slowly held her at arm's length so that he could look into her face, a dark, brooding look in his grey

eyes that sent shivers of sensation down her spine. "*You're* wrong if you believe that, Isa," he said quietly, and gave her no chance to argue before he pulled her back into his arms and rested his face on the softness of her hair, the depth of his sigh shuddering against her ear, as if he considered he had already lost her to Toby Carmichael.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Isa although she was reluctant to admit it even to herself, had been curiously disturbed by Chris's story of his romance with a girl from the village, and particularly by Toby's part in ending it. It was the latter that most puzzled Isa, for Chris had been so adamant about denying the general supposition that Lady Carmichael had paid for the girl to go to a domestic science college that she felt bound to believe him. It seemed such an odd thing for Toby to have done for the reason that Chris implied—that Toby had been in some way jealous of his success with the girl.

But perhaps Isa's uneasiness in part stemmed from Chris's own attitude towards the girl when he spoke of her. He had sounded so condescending when he referred to her as 'only a village girl', as if the opinion was his own, for all he attributed it to Toby, and she could not help wondering just how close and how serious he had been about her.

It was hard to visualise Toby being so consumed with jealousy about his gardener's affection for the girl that he had decided to further her education simply to get her away from him. Toby had no cause for jealousy in any case, and particularly not about Chris.

There was no denying that Chris was a man of moods, and his attitude towards Toby was some-

times incredibly malicious that the wonder was he stayed on with a man he disliked so, but Isa valued his friendship and she believed he was as genuinely fond of her as he claimed to be. At the moment she could not see herself ever feeling strongly enough about him to entertain the idea of marriage, but she hoped they could continue their friendship.

As she often did on her half-day, Isa had hoped to see Chris, but he had forewarned her that he was driving into London on an errand for Lady Carmichael and would be gone most of the day. So, left in her own company and unable to think of anything more constructive to do on a hot sunny July afternoon, she decided on the spur of the moment to visit the one part of the estate she had not so far seen.

The dense and rather gloomy-looking woodland along the south boundary had never appealed to her, and she had until now carefully avoided going there because of its somewhat creepy prospect. Its trees looked taller and darker than the woods beside the river bank and along the northern boundary, but on a day as hot as now it also looked cool and shady.

She looked across as she walked down the hill from the house, at the darkness of the close-standing trees, tall straight pines, sombrely chill against the bright blue summer sky, and almost without realising it she changed direction and veered south down the long slope and away from the river.

The contrast with her more usual haunts was even more startling than she anticipated when she entered

the wood, and briefly a little shudder ran through her body, though heaven knew what caused such a reaction, except the effect of the sun being suddenly hidden and the impact of the intense shade on her fertile imagination.

The tall, slim conifers grew so close together that they completely shut out the sun and denied even a glimpse of the blue sky above their pointed tips. There was a curious stillness too that was quite unlike the leafy tranquillity she was used to, and the birds seemed to whistle less carelessly. Instead they fluttered from among the clustering branches with *sudden* chatters of sound that suggested panic, and startled Isa into gasping aloud.

It was quite ridiculous to allow herself to indulge in such fantasies, she realised, but just the same, as she walked through the quiet shadows, the air struck her as more chill than cool, and she missed the soft mumble of the river that was never very far away in her usual haunts.

The ground beneath her feet was thick and soft with fallen pine needles and deadened her tread, but their scent was pleasant and tingled in her nostrils agreeably. Making her way through the thick tangle of some lower-growing bushes, she drew back hastily suddenly when she realised that a big lake lay only just in front of her, a matter of a few feet away. It was completely surrounded by elder and some clinging vine-like growth she did not recognise, and she might so easily have walked right into it that she stopped in alarm suddenly.

It took her only a moment or two to decide that

the concealed lake, like the rest of the woods, was no more inviting than its surroundings. Its waters looked depthless and, densely shadowed by the tall close growing trees, it was dark and gloomy. Isa was all the more startled, therefore, when she thought she detected a sign of movement' among the weed growing at the edge.

At first she caught her breath nervously when, from the corner of her eye, she saw ripples disturb the murky surface of the lake and a vague quivering hint of movement just below the weed suggested some form of life. Across on the far side she thought she could see the outline of a narrow stream, probably fed in from the wider waters of the river somewhere along its length. Betrayed by the spiky leaves of iris, it followed a short, winding course, and judging by the density of the weed growing along it, its flow of water must be almost completely blocked.

The presence of moving water from a stream, however sluggish, would have satisfied her as a cause of the disturbance, but as she stood there on the edge of the lake another movement caught her eye, no more than a foot or two from where she stood, and a second later rippling circles spread out across the surface of the lake, as if something had risen and as swiftly submerged again.

An ever-increasing sense of uneasiness was briefly overcome by curiosity and Isa blinked for a moment as she pondered on the cause. She was accustomed to Aunt Carrie's small goldfish pool, and to the bigger, less glamorous inhabitants of the pool in a park near her home in London, but she

could see no glint of silver below the surface of the water here.

It was in an anxious attempt to prove to herself that it had indeed been a fish of some sort that she pushed through the crowding bushes a little further and leaned out to peer into the water, her eyes narrowed as she peered down into the murky depths.

It was no swift silver fish that darted into view among the weed, however, but a long, leaden grey shape that moved with almost contemptuous slowness, its pointed head and bulging eyes just below the surface of the water. It must have been easily four feet long, she estimated, and Isa stared at it in horror for several seconds, scarcely able to believe it was real, for it had a set of hideous pointed teeth in its jaws that looked needle-sharp, and it seemed to be regarding her steadily and malevolently from the shelter of the weed,

With the bushes growing so close to the water's edge and the weed so thickly gathered, it was difficult to realise where solid ground ended and weed began. The short step forward that she took was almost involuntary as she peered into the water, but it was sufficient to send her toppling over and into the dark, stagnant depths of the lake, and she let out a full-throated scream of fear and surprise as she fell.

Not that there was anyone about to hear her but birds and whatever other wild life the wood sustained, and the birds close by took off in panic as shrill and urgent as her own, while she swiftly surfaced and gasped for breath. The water was icy

cold, even on a warm sunny day, and the weed clung to her like clammy fingers as she struggled to stay on the surface, a terrifying vision of that long grey shape lending panic to her efforts.

At any moment she expected to feel needle-sharp teeth sinking into her flesh and she threshed about in the tangle of weed, trying both to pull herself out of the water and to break the clinging hold of the weed. She was breathing erratically as she reached for an overhanging bush to pull herself out, giving silent thanks for the ability to swim.

The elder bush she grabbed was more slender than she had expected and it took several tries before she found support strong enough to bear her weight, then she hauled herself up on to the marshy bank. There was no sign of the long grey shape among the weed when she looked back, but she felt a shivering certainty that it had been only briefly driven from its post by her struggles and she hastily drew her legs up under her.

She was covered in the clinging weed and soaking wet too, but at, least she was free of the danger of "being attacked by that huge creature with the spiny teeth. Being a town girl, Isa had no great knowledge of what creatures lived in pools and lakes like this one. Some streams had trout which were good to eat, she knew, but the monster she had seen had been no trout, she was certain of that, and she could not imagine how it came to be there.

One thing she was quite certain of was that someone, and she had Toby Carmichael specifically in mind, should have warned her of the dangers that

lurked in these woods. The pool or lake, whatever he chose to call it, was a danger to life and limb and should be better looked after, not allowed to become overgrown and consequently hidden from view. As for keeping creatures like that for anyone to come upon unawares, it was not only dangerous but positively criminal.

A notice should be displayed, warning people of both the presence of the lake and its inhabitant. All manner of wild and indignant complaints whirled through her mind as she sat there, shivering cold and wet, trying to recover her breath sufficiently to walk back to the house. She would tell Toby exactly what she thought of his negligence when she saw him next. That he was responsible it never even entered her head to doubt, and he should have the dangers pointed out to him.

Walking back through the woods the distance seemed twice as far as on the outward journey, and Isa was shivering and miserably uncomfortable by the time she emerged from the wood again and stepped into the sunshine. She had done her best to remove the weed that clung to her hair, but her legs, arms and clothes were stained with its horrible slimy stench, and she squelched up the hill in wet sandals, more and more angry in her discomfort. The little blue and white cotton dress that had looked so cool and fresh would never be the same again, and she toyed with the idea of claiming a new one at the expense of her employer.

She thanked heaven for the absence of both Mrs. Grayle and Toby when she reached the house, for

she was certain that she must look as bad as she felt. Squelching her way into the hall, she tried to close the outer door quietly so that Lady Carmichael should not hear her and perhaps call out to her, for she could not possibly appear in the sitting-room in such a state. Also she was reluctant to face Lady Carmichael with the reason for her present state and her probable derision.

She was no more than half way across the hall, however, when the old lady called to her from the sitting-room and Isa looked down at her bedraggled person resignedly. "You came back very early, Isabella," she told her. "Is it too hot for you in the sun?"

Isa did not go into the sitting-room, as she was probably expected to do, but stayed where she was at the foot of the stairs, hoping to be able to retreat without being called in. "Oh no, my lady," she assured her, "it's—it's just right!"

Although all her accusations had been so far unspoken, Isa's voice shook as much as if she had already indulged in a fierce argument with Toby, and she knew without doubt that the old lady would notice it. Sure enough there were sounds from the sitting-room that meant the old lady was moving about, and a few seconds later she appeared in the hall, her tall figure supported by a stick and her shrewd old eyes narrowed suspiciously when she saw the state Isa was in.

"In heaven's name, child," she said in a sharp voice, "what *have* you been doing?"

The accusations she would have willingly hurled

at Toby were bitten back hastily and Isa sought for more reasonable explanations to satisfy the glint in those shrewd dark eyes. "I—I had a slight accident," she said, and the old lady gave a fierce snort of disbelief as she came across the hall towards her.

The dark eyes travelled over her and the aristocratic nose wrinkled in distaste at the definite odour of damp and stagnant weed she emitted. "You look as if someone has tried to drown you," Lady Carmichael declared. "What happened, Isabella?"

"I went for a walk," Isa told her, reluctantly facing the inevitable. Sooner or later she would have to explain, but at the moment her first thought was to get into a hot bath and some clean clothes. "I was in the woods on the south boundary," she said, "and I fell into that awful lake."

"Awful?" The old lady echoed her opinion with raised brows, standing over her, as unrelenting in her manner as Toby often was, and Isa found it difficult to believe there were no blood ties between them.

"It's so dark and—and creepy," Isa told her, wondering how long it was since the old lady had seen the place.

"I presume you're talking about the pool in the south wood," Lady Carmichael said, "which, as far as I remember, was not in the least awful! Explain yourself, child!" She looked again at Isa's damp and stained clothes and shook her head. "No, you'd better go and get out of those wet things first," she told her. "Bath and change and rid yourself of that dreadful smell!"

"Yes, of course, my lady!" Isa needed no second

bidding. She fled, her sandals squelching on the stairs as she went until she bent and slipped them off, continuing barefoot the rest of the way.

"You will have to explain yourself when I see you again!" Lady Carmichael called after her warningly, and Isa paused at the top of the stairs to look back at her.

"I—I have to start cooking dinner very soon, my lady," she reminded her. "I won't have—"

"After dinner, after dinner!" An impatient hand waved away excuses. "Now for heaven's sake get into a bath, child, and remove that awful smell!"

It took rather longer than she anticipated to rid herself of the last vestiges of the weed and Isa noticed with relief that it was indeed high time she started to prepare their evening meal. At least the fact that she was required in the kitchen meant that she was spared explanations for the time being, and she thanked heaven for the respite. Apart from anything else she was not yet ready to try and explain the unknown creature that had frightened her so, and she had an uneasy suspicion that she would not be believed when she did.

Isa half expected Toby to visit the kitchen, for the old lady would inevitably report her mishap to him, and she cooked dinner in a state of suspended agitation. The wonder was, in the circumstances, that the meal was as good as it turned out. To her relief no one said anything about the incident during dinner, in fact Toby spent most of the time regaling his grandmother with the details of a case he had in court that morning, but Isa suspected he

had been told, from his behaviour. The way he cocked a curious brow at her every so often, and the glitter of mingled curiosity and laughter that lurked in his eyes, gave him away, and aroused her anger again when she thought of him finding it funny.

Lady Carmichael retired to her own small sitting-room after dinner and informed Isa that she would not be required again, since she intended writing some letters. It would have suited Isa better if the old lady had been there when the subject of the pool was raised, but there was nothing she could do about it.

She saw the old lady safely upstairs, then returned to the sitting-room to collect her book, hoping to escape to her own room without being called to account, for Toby was still there. During dinner she had had time to think while the two of them talked together, and she had already had second thoughts about being too aggressive about her mishap. The matter could be raised at some other time when she was able to put her case more coolly. Toby was far too good an advocate to face while she was still feeling shaky from the ordeal.

She managed to collect her book without comment, and was on her way out of the door when Toby called her back, and she turned and looked at him reluctantly, in no doubt of his reasons. His blue eyes regarded her for a moment as she stood in the doorway, and he leaned against the tall, elegant Georgian mantel, one hand touching his chin, an air of speculation about him.

"Well?" he prompted gently at last, and Isa hastily looked down at her hands, doing her best to avoid his gaze.

"Lady Carmichael's told you," she guessed, resigned to the inevitable, and he nodded.

"Yes, Grandmama told me," he agreed in that soft, quiet voice that could do such disturbing things to her senses if she allowed it to. "I carefully kept out of the kitchen before dinner," he went on, his eyes fixed on her steadily as he spoke. "I thought it might be more prudent!"

"I was busy," Isa said. "It isn't very easy to cook dinner with someone getting under your feet." •

"I hadn't thought of it like that," he said with a slight inclination of his head. "I heard you were dripping with water and smelled to high heaven of some noxious weed," he added. "Something to do with falling into the pool in the south wood, I understood, so I thought it might be safer if I gave you a wide berth until you'd had time to cool down."

The confession, made with such bland frankness, had the surprising effect of making her want to laugh, but she hastily stifled the feeling. She had every right to be angry about the danger of that hidden lake and if she laughed now it, would give him quite the wrong impression of her feelings. Since he had insisted on raising the matter, she would let him know how she felt in no uncertain manner.

Sticking out her chin, she looked at him with a bright gleam in her eyes that must have warned him she had cooled off less than he expected. "It's

dangerous," she informed him with calculated coolness. "That lake—pool, or whatever you call it, *is* *a* definite hazard in more ways than one!"

"To whom?" The question was pedantically correct and Isa suspected he had made it so, deliberately to provoke her.

"To me, for one!" she said shortly. "No one had warned me about there being a lake there and I almost walked right into it—I could have drowned! And suppose a child was to stray in there—the danger is obvious!"

"It's unlikely a child *would* stray in there," Toby remarked quietly, "it's too far from the road for stray trespassers."

"Nevertheless," Isa insisted, "*I* fell into it and *I* had difficulty getting out again!"

"And you blame me?" He asked the question quietly, but she suspected he resented the accusation, despite that persistent gleam of amusement that still lingered in his eyes.

"It's your responsibility!" Isa informed him. "You should do something about it! And that great-*creciture* too! Heaven knows what it is or how it got there, but it shouldn't be allowed to remain there and—and frighten people half to death!" She was warming to her cause now, and all the discomfort she had endured after falling into the pool showed in her pink flushed cheeks and the bright indignant glitter of her eyes.

"What creature?" Toby asked, regarding her curiously. "There are fish in there, or there used to be, but there's no Loch Ness monster, to my knowledge."

"This couldn't have been a fish," Isa denied, though she felt much less sure of her argument now that she came to think about it. She used her hands and the full length of her arms to demonstrate the size of the creature she had seen. "It was huge, and it had enormous pointed teeth and bulging eyes!" Her own graphic description recalled the thing she had seen looking up at her from the depths of that fathomless pool, and she shuddered involuntarily at the memory.

For a few seconds Toby looked puzzled, then to her intense chagrin, he laughed. Isa glared at him indignantly while he shook his head and laughed unrestrainedly for several minutes before he had breath enough to speak., "Oh, Isabella," he said at last, "you are *priceless!*"

"*I fail* to see anything funny about falling into a filthy pond with a vicious creature like that!" Isa declared angrily. "**I—I** could have been hurt!"

He looked at her for a moment and his blue eyes were still glistening with the laughter he barely restrained. "I know they grow pretty big if the water's not fished," he told her, "but don't you know **a** pike when you see one, you little ignoramus?"

Colour warmed her cheeks suddenly when realisation dawned at last, and Isa wished the floor would open and swallow her up, there and then. She had frightened herself into believing that an overgrown fish was something alien, and been terrified of it attacking her and, worse still, she had given Toby the opportunity to laugh at her ignorance.

His laughter was what rankled most, and she blamed him for not realising just how genuine her fear had been. "I know nothing at all about fish," she told him in a small, tight voice that resented both her own gullibility and his scorn. "I've never seen anything like that in my life before. It was so —so *ugly!*"

"They're certainly ugly brutes," Toby agreed readily, "but I've never heard of one being taken for a prehistoric monster before. It wouldn't have eaten you, no matter what it looked like doing!"

Isa glared at him reproachfully, seeing again those sharp, pointed teeth in the creature's great jaws. "How could I be expected to know what it was?" she said. "I've never seen a pike, as far as I know!" She shuddered again briefly. "I hope I never do again!"

"How could you know?" Toby echoed, and shook his head while his eyes regarded her steadily. "I hadn't realised just what a little town bird you are."

There was something in his voice, something in her Own reaction to it that gave her a sensation of being on the brink of excitement, and she hastily took a firm hold on her all too susceptible emotions. Once more she stuck out her chin and looked at him with reproachful eyes. "All right, maybe I was silly about the fish, whatever it was," she allowed reluctantly, "but that doesn't absolve you from blame altogether. You own the wood and that pool and you should be responsible for seeing that no one comes to harm in there. You're responsible

for seeing that no one comes across that pool unexpectedly and falls into it, like I did !"

Toby's long fingers stroked his chin thoughtfully for a moment, then he raised one brow. "Are you teaching me law?" he asked quietly, and Isa flushed.

"No, of course not," she denied, "it's just that—"

"Oh, I know you're still suffering from an injured pride because you fell foul of that monster in the pool," he said quietly but insistently, "but don't take it out on me, Isabella. I'm legally responsible, as you imply, but I don't expect to pay someone else to look after things for me and then have to do the job myself."

"Mr. Carmichael, I—"

"I wasn't await that the pool had fallen into such neglect," he pressed on, "for the simple reason that I seldom, if ever, go near the place, but I do pay a man full-time, and two others part-time, to make sure that the whole place is kept safe and tidy. I don't expect to have to check on my employees every five minutes, although in view of your complaints it seems I shall have to in future." The blue eyes looked at her challengingly and for the first time Isa realised just where her angry outburst could lead. "You follow my meaning, I'm sure," Toby said softly.

Isa nodded, biting her lip on the realisation that it would be Chris who eventually bore the brunt of her complaint. "I suppose it was my own fault in a way," she admitted, in an attempt to make things easier for Chris. "It was falling into the water immediately after spotting that great fish thing. It

frightened me and I was angry about not having been warned."

"*War* angry?" Toby queried, and she bit her lip when she saw the glint of mockery in his eyes.

"I can see now that I shouldn't have blamed you for it," she told him. "I shouldn't have—"

"Given me a lecture on my responsibilities?" Toby suggested quietly, and Isa looked up and met his eyes. It was a long time before she could look away again and her heart was pounding remorselessly in her breast, her legs suddenly weak and seemingly incapable of holding her weight.

"I'm—sorry," she managed at last, and he smiled.

"You always are, Isabella," he told her, "but you still fight me as determinedly, don't you? Couldn't you, just once, try giving me the benefit of the doubt occasionally, like you do Chris Burrows? You'll have to admit that you wouldn't have backed down so readily if there hadn't been a danger of Chris getting a rocket from me, would you?"

"I—I suppose not." She made the admission reluctantly, but it was no good denying it, and she had been reminded suddenly of Chris's story about his girl-friend being sent away by Toby. The incident still puzzled her and she looked at Toby for a second, her present situation briefly forgotten. Try as she would, she could not see Toby sending a young girl away for further education simply because he was jealous, and she shook her head over it, without realising she was doing it.

"Now what have I said?" Toby asked, and cocked a brow at her.

Isa hastily shook her head again. "Oh, nothing," she told him, and rapidly recalled the subject of his question. "I'm sorry, Mr. Carmichael."

"Hmm !" He eyed her for a moment, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I suppose your Aunt Carrie's upbringing forbids you to use your employer's christian name, even though you wade into an argument with him without a second thought?" he suggested, and Isa blinked for a moment uncomprehendingly. "Well?" he prompted.

"I—I don't know," she said at last in a small voice. "I'm not sure if Lady Carmichael would—"

"Grandmama is much less of a Victorian than *you* are!" Toby retorted swiftly, and laughed when he saw her expression. "Don't use her as an excuse, Isabella!"

"I don't need an excuse!" She felt her heart lurch crazily when she met his eyes. A bright deep blue that glittered at her from the depth of those quite unsuitably feminine-looking eyelashes.

"Then why not?" he asked.

sa was at a loss to know what to say, but obviously he was waiting for her to say something, and she felt suddenly shy as she faced him, her eyes trying to avoid the infinitely disturbing gaze of his. "I don't know," she confessed.

"You didn't hesitate to call Chris Burrows by his first name, did you?"

The question took her by surprise and she looked up swiftly, again reminded of the girl from the village and her involvement with the same two men. "I—I don't quite see what that has to do with it,"

she said, and he laughed, shaking his head over her prevarication.

"It has nothing at all to do with it," he admitted. "But I like to know where I stand, and it seems Chris has a much better standing than I have—now I know!"

Isa looked startled for a moment, then she shook her head slowly, looking at him with curious eyes. "You don't really like Chris, do you?" she asked, and a moment later was appalled by her own indiscretion.

Toby, however, seemed no more than mildly amused by the accusation and he was smiling, though a little wryly, she thought. "I rather think the boot's on the other foot," he told her quietly. "But—no, there are things about Chris Burrows I don't exactly admire, and his getting too close to you is one thing that worries me."

Stunned for a moment, Isa stared at him. "I—I don't understand," she said at last in a small voice.

Toby said nothing for a moment, but he left his place by the mantel and walked across to the window, turning his back to her in a stance that reminded her of their first meeting. "Has he told you about Faith Merton?" he asked suddenly.

"I—I don't know." She sought hastily to recall if Chris had given a name to the girl he had spoken of, and decided he hadn't. "He told me that he was—that he had a girl-friend once, a girl from the village."

"That's right, Faith Merton, she was seventeen at the time, and pretty as the proverbial picture."

So near now to Toby's version of the story, Isa felt she had the opportunity to hear it all and curiosity drove her on to ask questions she would normally never have dreamed of asking, saying things that were frankly inquisitive. "Chris says—" She swallowed hard. "Chris told me that you sent her away to college," she ventured, and he nodded.

A moment later he turned and looked at her, his eyes hinting at their customary laughter as he studied her for a moment. "Though not for the reasons Chris would have given you," he said. "Grand-mama took an interest in the girl and—well, it was thought best to get her away from here."

"Because Chris wanted to—because he was serious about her?" she asked, and Toby took several seconds to answer.

"Because he wanted her to live with him," he said at last, and shook his head over Isa's gasp of surprise.

"Not to—"

"Not to marry her, if that's what you're going to ask" Toby told her bluntly. "She was only a village girl, you see," he said, and this time it really did sound like a quote instead of an opinion.

"I see." She licked her lips, too stunned for the moment to know what she thought, but surprisingly thankful that her opinion of Toby had been confirmed.

He stood over by the window looking across at her. "He hasn't said anything of the same sort to you, has he, Isa?" he asked, and Isa hastily shook her head.

"No," she said huskily. "He—he's asked me to marry him."

He looked startled for a moment, then frowned, his blue eyes sweeping swiftly and anxiously over her face as he spoke. "You haven't said you will?" he asked, as if he wanted to be convinced, and Isa shook her head. Without another word he walked across and came and stood in front of her, saying nothing for the moment, and Isa would have given much to look up at him and have some idea of what he was thinking. Instead she kept her eyes averted and tried to keep a more firm control on her emotions. "Isabella." She glanced up, drawn by the tone of his voice, and he reached out with one hand and drew a finger tip down the softness of her cheek.

It was a delicate, sensitive moment of suspense, and Isa could feel her whole body trembling. Then suddenly there was a sound from the hall, a light creaking that Isa hazily recognised as the stairs creaking and as if a spell had been broken, she stepped back hastily out of Toby's reach and brushed back her hair in a nervous gesture that was echoed by the tremor in her voice.

"Lady Carmichael!" she breathed huskily. "I must go and see if she can manage on her own!"

She did not catch the words he said, in her haste to depart, but she could have sworn that they were curses and as she went out of the room and across the hall to the old lady, she wondered what would have happened if the interruption had not come when it did.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ISA did not see Chris for a couple of days, and in a way she was thankful to have the time to think over what she had learned about him. He had never been other than courteous towards her and she was convinced that his expressed desire to marry her was genuine, but in the light of what Toby had told her she was bound to see him differently.

All along she had harboured doubts about the malice he had attributed to Toby, but it came as a to realise that she was prepared to believe Toby's version of the story wholeheartedly. Facing Chris again, with the knowledge she had now, would present certain embarrassing problems, and when she looked at her reflection briefly, she could see the doubt reflected in her eyes.

It was cooler today and the sun appeared only Way from behind clouds that were blown along by a wind more chill than she expected, so that she shivered as she walked out of the house and wondered if she should have worn a coat. Walking would soon warm her, she decided, and turned down the hill in the direction of the river, more by instinct than conscious effort.

It was almost certain that she would see Chris, for he always looked forward to their Saturday meetings, and sooner or later she was going to have to

decide whether things past were to make any difference to her own feelings for him, but she had a strange reluctance to make the discovery today. What his reactions would be if he ever found out that she had heard the other side of the story about Faith Merton remained to be seen, but she hoped he need never know, and especially who had told her. If he did it was bound to become one more reason for his disliking Toby, and she had no desire to add to that.

It was darker and cooler under the trees today, and little of the spasmodic sunlight penetrated the latticework of branches over her head. Also the birds seemed less active too, and the chiller stillness reminded her uneasily of the gloomy wood on the south boundary.

She walked slowly, down towards the river, more reluctant than she had ever been to meet Chris, although it would almost certainly determine once and for all her relationship with him. There was no reason, she told herself over and over again, why his affair with Faith Merton should affect her own feelings towards him, but she knew in her heart that it would.

He was not waiting for her on the river bank, as he so often was, nor did he appear from among the trees as she walked along the bank in the direction of his cottage, and she was aware of a growing uneasiness at his absence. Always, when he was unable to see her for some reason, he let her know he would not be there, but today he had said nothing about having other things to do and she was left

with the discomfiting memory at the back of her mind of Toby's hint that Chris would eventually carry the blame for her complaints about the south wood pool.

She saw him at last in the small, neat garden that surrounded his cottage, industriously hoeing between rows of carrots and peas, and her heart gave a brief, warning flip of anxiety when she noted the studiously averted head. He must surely have heard or seen her coming and she would normally have expected him to look up and greet her, instead it seemed as if he had not even noticed her.

She walked to the gate set in a surrounding hedge and stood there looking at him for a moment in resigned silence, her regret at his lack of welcome mingled with a hint of impatience as she tried to sort out her own tangled emotions. It was plain to her that Toby had conveyed his displeasure about the state of the pool, and probably her own accidental ducking too, for Chris would hate being reprimanded by Toby more than anything.

"Chris?" She spoke quietly, and for a moment wondered if he had heard her, for he made no response.

Then suddenly he turned and she was faced with the angry gaze of his grey eyes, making it plain why he had not been there to meet her. "Hello, Isa," he said in a flat, unfriendly voice. "I didn't expect to see you again."

"Oh, Chris. I can't believe you thought that!" She opened the gate and went through into the garden, closing it carefully behind her, while Chris

simply stood there with his two hands round the handle of the hoe, so tightly clasped that the bones of his knuckles showed white,

"Why not?" he asked harshly. "You complained to the boss about me, didn't you? Do you expect me to thank you for giving him a chance to play the big, important employer he thinks himself?"

His mouth twisted into an expression of bitter derision and he went back to his hoeing while Isa stood just inside the gate, biting her lip, appalled by his reaction. She had expected him to be hurt, perhaps even angry, if he knew she had caused the complaint, but she had not anticipated such fierce bitterness as he was showing and it stunned her into silence momentarily.

After a moment she walked along the narrow path beside the row he was working on, and reached out to touch his hand, noticing how hard and unyielding it felt to her touch. "I'm sorry, Chris," she said, and looked at the gauntly good-looking face anxiously. "I had no intention of getting you into trouble. I hoped Toby wouldn't say anything about my complaining, but I suppose I should have known he would."

"You should have known!" Chris echoed bitterly, and it was obvious from his expression that he found her use of Toby's christian name far from palatable. "You seem to have progressed well in the past few days," he remarked acidly. "Now he's Toby!"

"Oh, Chris, *please!*" Regret for the trouble she had inadvertently caused him was rapidly giving

way to anger in the face of his determined self-pity and she remembered Lady Catmichael's dislike of that same characteristic in him. She had thought the judgment rather harsh at the time, but now she was beginning to understand it. "I told him off because I thought it was *his* responsibility!" she told him, her eyes bright and angrily impatient. "I had no idea he would blame you--I didn't even realise it was anything to do with you!"

He said nothing for a moment, but the hands holding the handle of the hoe eased slightly and eventually he shook his head, looking at her with *an* expression that was almost as contrite as it was suspicious. "I never did tell you the truth about my work here, did I?" he asked in *a* dull, flat voice, "but I suppose you knew?"

"I knew," Isa agreed quietly, "but it doesn't matter in the least what your job is. It makes no difference to me!"

"No, no, of course it wouldn't." Pity was already taking over from impatience as she watched him, and her instinct now was to assure him that getting him into trouble with his hated employer was the last thing in her mind.

"I—I think he was concerned in case anyone else fell into the pool as I did," she ventured. "It would fall upon him if anyone did, he's legally responsible, and that's what I pointed out to him."

"Yes, of course." He shook his head again. "I suppose I did go off half-cocked," he admitted. "Of course you didn't intend the blame to fall on me, Isa, I should have realised that. It's just that *Mr.*

Carmichael couldn't resist getting at me about it—the opportunity was too good to miss!"

It was difficult to encourage his return to reason without putting all the blame on to Toby, and Isa was extremely reluctant to do that. She could see Toby's point of view with surprising clarity suddenly and barely stopped to wonder why. "I—I really don't think Toby saw it merely as an opportunity to reprimand you." she said cautiously. "You're too--too sensitive about him, Chris."

"Oh, am I?" The question was bitterly sarcastic. "And I suppose you'd know him so much better than I do, wouldn't you?"

"Nothing of the sort!" Isa denied swiftly and impatiently. "It's just that I don't see Toby Carmichael as the kind of man who indulges in petty spite, that's all!"

"Oh, of *course* not!"

Isa drew a deep breath, ready to defend both. Toby and herself against a tirade of unfair abuse, but something made her bite back the angry words before they were formed, and she let out a great sigh instead, shaking her head at him in a last attempt to make him see sense. "I didn't come here to quarrel with you, Chris," she told him as calmly as she was able for the churning sensation in her stomach caused by a chaos of emotions she was incapable of controlling. "If you don't want me to stay then I won't, but I hate to think of us fighting over this and perhaps spoiling what has been, to me anyway, something pleasant and rewarding." -

He said nothing for the moment, but simply stood

there with his hands tight and white knuckled again, his head stiffly averted, then slowly he turned back to her and for a long moment he looked at her steadily with something appealingly uncertain in his eyes that she was bound to respond to. "Isa!" he said softly, and let the hoe fall to the ground as he reached for her hands. "I don't want to quarrel with you, you must know it's the last thing I want! I couldn't bear not to see you again, and—" He glanced at the open door of the cottage just behind her. "Why don't you come in and I'll make some tea? It won't take a minute and you know it always makes me more civilised!"

Smiling, and ready to accept the olive branch, Isa nodded, although she was a little wary of how far the reconciliation was expected to go. "I won't have tea, Chris, thank you," she told him, "but I will come in and talk to you for a while if you'd like me to."

"I'd love you to!" Chris assured her earnestly, and put an arm around her shoulders as he steered her towards the cottage door. "I don't mind whether we have tea or not, as long as you're here!"

"I always do see you on Saturdays," Isa reminded him gently. "I didn't know what had happened to-day when you weren't in your usual place."

"I was so angry!" He stood with her in the centre of the one small room the cottage possessed downstairs, holding her hands close to his chest, his gauntly handsome face looking down at her, the grey eyes gleaming with the earnestness of his plea. "I'm sorry, Isa," he said. "I truly am, I should have

known you really had nothing to do with that arrogant devil's spite. He's as cocky and vicious as you'd expect somebody like that to be !"

"Oh, Chris, no!" Isa gazed at him with wide, unhappy eyes, her every instinct telling her to defend Toby, and yet still reluctant to turn against Chris.

"I know him!" Chris insisted. "I knew him at school and I've known him ever since, practically; he was never any different." He looked at her narrowly for a moment, as if debating something with himself. "Did you know we went to the same school?" he asked, and Isa nodded.

"Yes, Lady Carmichael told me."

"Huh! Then you'll know how I come to be here, doing this—this menial job while he lords it over me!" His voice was sharp and bitter with resentment and Isa shrank from the realisation of just how virulent his hatred was.

Toby had never shown any of the same passionate dislike of him, and what he had told her about Chris had been only at her instigation, and then reluctantly. Lady Carmichael had volunteered the information about Chris's personal affairs much more willingly, and he held no such animosity against her.

"I know about your—your parents being killed," she agreed, quietly, despite the churning state of her emotions. "I was sorry about it, Chris, but—well, you can't blame Toby for that, any more than you can blame him for being adopted." She looked up at him, her eyes searching his face slowly, then she shook her head as if the reason for his dislike still

eluded her. "You really hate Toby, don't you?" she asked.

For a moment she thought he would deny it, but then his mouth tightened and he nodded, almost eagerly. "I hate him," he admitted, with such coldness that Isa shivered.

"Then why," she asked in a small anxious voice, "do you go on working for him?"

Chris did not answer for a long time, but he looked down at her with a blank, cold look in his eyes that made him horribly unfamiliar, then at last he shook his head slowly. "What choice have I?" he asked. "I can't afford to leave the cottage and I don't see why I should! Lady Carmichael gave me the cottage and the job and I consider I work for her, regardless of what the lawyers say!"

"But if you hate Toby—"

"Oh, never doubt that I do!" Chris said harshly. "I hate him because he has everything I should have! A profession, a fine home, a family—all of it! I should have everything he enjoys, but by right of birth, not because a kind-hearted old lady took pity on Elm when he was a baby!"

"Oh, Chris!"

Isa spoke softly, but her heart shrank from the incredible bitterness, from the hatred he seemed almost to feed on, and it came to her with absolute certainty as she stood there listening to him that she could never become fond enough of Chris to marry him. Fondness, even pity, wasn't enough, there had to be respect too, and gentleness, and at the moment she felt nothing but a strange mixture

of pity and anger towards him because he was using Toby as the whipping-boy for his own shortcomings.

"Isa!" Eagerly he pulled her against him, his hands cupping her face, looking down at her with an intensity that made her shiver. "You're the one good thing he's ever been responsible for," he said, stroking her soft cheeks with his fingers. "He brought you here and for that I'm grateful to him! I love you, Isa, please say you'll marry me!"

She refrained from pulling away from him, although her instincts told her it was what she wanted to do, and she kept her eyes downcast so that he should not read the expression in them. "I—I can't, Chris."

"Isa!" He lifted her face, trying to make her look at him, and at last she raised her eyes, looking at the deep, dark greyness of his.

"I'm sorry, Chris, but I can't."

"Oh, my God!" He sounded blankly despairing and Isa's heart thudded anxiously at her ribs as she faced heaven knew what crisis. He buried his face against her neck, his hands holding her with fierce tightness against him "You don't mean it, Isa, you *can't* mean it!"

"Chris! Chris, please!" She tried to break his hold on her, but succeeded only in keeping him at arm's length while she fought with an ever-increasing sense of panic. Her heart was pounding wildly in her breast as she recognised a look of mingled desperation and fury in his eyes that was more frightening than anything she had ever seen before.

"Don't turn me down, Isa!" His grip on her arms

was cruelly tight and she struggled against him with every ounce of her strength. "Don't turn against me," he begged. "Marry me, Isa. Please !"

"No, Chris, no, I can't!" She turned her face to avoid the kiss she anticipated when he bent his head towards her, but he was too quick for her and his mouth covered hers with a bruising hardness that was more assault than caress. "No!" she pleaded desperately when she managed at last to free her mouth. "No, Chris!"

His eyes glittered in his gauntly handsome face, angry at her lack of response, resentful of her refusal to marry him "It's Carmichael !" he said between clenched teeth, and Isa stared at him

Panting for breath, she was too stunned for a moment to deny it. "No," she whispered at last. "No, no, you're wrong!"

"Of course I'm not wrong !" His fingers dug into her soft flesh cruelly. "I've seen it coming! He's got you at his beck and call like the rest of his—women !"

o!" She struggled against him even more desperately, and her cheeks were pink-flushed, her brain spinning with the very idea of being what Chris accused her of. "Let me go!" she panted breathlessly. "Let me go !"

"I thought you were different," Chris said in the same cold, hard voice. "I thought you were worth waiting for, worth asking to be my wife, but you're no different, you're as ready to come running when he calls as the rest of his easy conquests!"

"Chris !" She wrenched her hands free at last, and

swung the left one against his face in a slap that was much harder than she had intended it to be.

For a second neither of them spoke or moved, then he put an unsteady hand to his burning cheek and his eyes had a dark, glittering look that Isa found far too menacing to face any longer. She gave a small cry of alarm and turned swiftly, running out of the open door behind her and into the comparative warmth of the open air.

"Isa!" His voice was choked with anger and she heard him coming after her as she went through the garden gate. "Isa, come back here!"

Without a backward glance Isa fled. Not along the river bank where she would have been too easy to follow, but through the trees, dodging and weaving the shrubs and trees that barred her path, her eyes filled with tears. Tears that were shed in part for the final disillusionment with the Chris she had thought she knew.

She had expected to face an emotional scene of some sort when she saw Chris again, but not such a thorough and complete destruction of her relationship with him, and she did not have to stop and wonder where things had gone wrong. Toby was the reason, and it was her own recognition of the fact that sent her racing through the wood as if she was pursued by something much more disturbing than an angry suitor.

The wood became more dense as she got away from the river, and she had to swerve more often, but she still did not slow down, although it was doubtful if Chris was still following. A sudden

glimpse of unexpected movement among the trees off to her right caught her eye and she instinctively looked across in that direction. The distraction, however brief, put her off guard and she stumbled, sprawling full length, her face pressed into the soft cushion of loam and fallen leaves.

She cried out as she went down, but it was sheer weariness, not injury, that kept her there, lying face down on the cool ground, panting for breath. Her head buried in her arms and her breathing so noisy as to drown any other sound, she did not hear anyone approach, nor detect the soft, impatient snort of a tethered horse some yards away.

"Isabella?" Strong hands lifted her and turned her over, holding her against a bended knee for a moment while anxious eyes *searched her* tear-stained and grimy face. "What on earth's happened to you?" It was instinctive to glance back the way she had come, although Chris was unlikely to be still in pursuit. The hands that held her so firmly could only belong to Toby and she looked up to see him frowning darkly despite the anxious look in his eyes "Is someone following you?" he asked, and Isa hastily bit her lip.

"No!" she denied, too hastily to be convincing.

Toby said nothing for a moment, but he too looked back among the trees, his frown suspicious. "You *were* running away," he decided. "And I'd guess it was from Chris Burrows."

Isa looked up into his face, meaning only to insist that she had simply tripped and fallen, but somehow something in his eyes made her feel very

small and in need of comfort suddenly, and instead of denying Chris's part in her flight, she turned and buried her face against him.

An arm hugged her consolingly and for several minutes she lay against that broad, comforting chest while a hand soothed over her hair gently, until she felt like closing her eyes and staying there for ever. A slight movement preceded the soft but firm pressure of his lips on her forehead, then *he* held her away from him gently, his hands taking hers and his eyes searching her face.

"So he *did* scare you!" he said. "Tell me what happened, Isabella."

For a moment she blinked at him uncertainly, then shook her head. "It—it doesn't matter," she whispered.

Toby looked at her steadily for a moment longer, then he got to his feet, reaching down to help her and still retaining his hold on her hands after she was standing. He looked down at her for a second in silence, then reached out and lightly lifted a tear from her cheek with a fingertip. "Are you going to tell me?" he asked softly. "Or shall I tell you?"

Isa looked down at their clasped hands and shook her head. "There's nothing to tell," she said in a small, shaky voice. "It's all over."

"Between you and Chris?"

She nodded, remembering Chris's angry assertions about Toby and avoiding his eyes at all costs. "I--I told him I couldn't marry him." she said.

"Couldn't?" He echoed the word softly, and for a second Isa looked up at him.

"I don't love him," she explained. "How could I?"

"How could you?" Again he echoed her words and she could feel her heart doing a rapid and alarming tattoo against her ribs. "And he didn't like the idea of being turned down," Toby guessed. He looked at her searchingly for a moment, holding her away from him slightly and studying her carefully from head to foot while he held her hands tightly in his. "What did he do to make you cry and run away from him like that?" he asked, and the tone of his voice made her look up again swiftly, for he sounded so coldly angry that she found it hard to believe. "Did he—hurt you, Isabella?" he insisted, and she shook her head.

"No, oh no !" she denied hastily, realising how he had misjudged the violence of Chris's disappointment. "He didn't hit me, Toby, I hit *him* !"

"You—" Toby stared at her in disbelief for several seconds, then slowly that deep unmistakable gleam of laughter appeared in his eyes and suddenly she was gathered into his arms and hugged against his chest while his body shook with a laughter that breathed deep and warm against her ear. "Oh, Isabella," he said huskily, his mouth close to her ear as he buried his face against her neck. "You sweet, adorable little battleaxe—you *would* !"

Isa found herself smiling, despite his description of her, and she was almost ready to admit to being as ready as Chris accused her of being to come running when Toby called. She laid her face against

Toby's chest and closed her eyes, all too aware of the steady beat of the heart under her ear and the warm, sensual strength of the body that excited her with its nearness.

He eased his hold on her slightly at last and lifted her chin with one gentle finger, looking down at her with a look of mild amusement, his smile teasing. "I never expected Chris to be the one on the business end of your fist," he told her softly. "I quite thought it would be me I"

Isa looked at him for a moment, then down again at her hands. It was difficult trying to **think** clearly in the circumstances, but think she must, for it was certain that this present gentle, lighthearted teasing was not meant to be taken seriously, and she must on no account allow herself to do so. "You almost did get slapped several times!" she told him pertly, trying to keep her voice light and at the same time steady.

"Did I?" His mouth, hovering just above hers, warmed her lips with the words.

to him, but whatever it was the words were lost in the breathless beating of her heart and she closed her eyes again when his head bent lower still, his mouth brushing hers lightly, almost tauntingly, at first.

The encircling arms tightened suddenly, drawing her closer still, one hand cradling her head, holding her where she could not move from the suddenly fierce pressure of his mouth. Her legs felt incredibly as if they had ceased to support her, and her arms

slid up round his neck as she clung to him tightly, an eager, almost irresistible sense of urgency making her soft shape melt against him.

His hands held her with gentle strength while his mouth sought the softness of her neck and the small, throbbing pulse at the base of her throat. From her throat to the rounded chin and the heavy-lidded violet eyes, until at last he looked down at her, his own deep blue eyes glowingly warm with an expression she had never seen there before.

One hand stroked back the hair from her forehead with firm, gentle strokes and he smiled. "You're quite a surprise, little one," he said softly, and laughed—a deep, soft sound that trickled along Isa's spine like a shiver. "Isabella!" He spoke her name softly and Isa closed her eyes again briefly on the sound of it, then as hastily opened them again and looked up at him, a small niggling uncertainty at the back of her mind, even while she fought to control her pounding heart-beat.

"Toby," she said in a small husky voice. "I don't—"

"You don't have to say or do anything," he whispered, kissing her forehead gently. "Only look as lovely as you do now." The blue eyes moved slowly over her face, and he lightly kissed each feature with a gentleness that was in itself a kind of ardour.

Isa, willing enough to be persuaded at the moment, merely sighed inwardly and laid her face against his chest again, her fingers curled against the warmth of his body through the thin cotton

shirt he wore and only a hint of uncertainty stirring somewhere in her breast at the memory of Chris's derisive words.

Some time, somehow, sooner or later she would have to face the fact that Toby must have been in this position many times before and she was certainly not the first girl he had kissed the way he had just kissed her, nor was she likely to be the last. But for the moment she was more than content to stay as she was, even though it was becoming increasingly obvious that Toby Carmichael could never again be to her merely an attractive man who also happened to be her employer. The true situation did not yet bear thinking about.

CHAPTER NINE

IT was during Sunday morning, after Isa had cooked breakfast and seen Lady Carmichael settled in a chair in the summerhouse, that she decided to go for a walk. She needed to think, and an hour or so in the open air offered a chance to do so and at the same time blow away some of the cobwebs that seemed to be dulling her brain.

Dinner was prepared and needed only the cooker turned on at the appropriate time, so there was no reason why she should not take advantage of the intervening time to enjoy the sunshine. August was drawing to a close and there would not be many more sunny days to enjoy.

Walking down the hill from the house she pondered on the past three months, since she had been at Trent House, and wondered if there was any outward sign of the change she felt had taken place in herself. There had been nothing of world-shattering importance to anyone else, but her own world had become so different from the one she had shared with Aunt Carrie for so long.

Nothing would ever be the same again, certainly not her relationship with Chris Burrows, but that had stood little chance of ending any differently, if she was honest about it. He was good-looking and pleasant in his way, but his almost pathological hatred of Toby had been a flaw from the begin-

ning, she recognised- it now.

Despite the sunshine and the warm, golden look of the countryside seen from the hill, she felt a disturbing sense of sadness that would not be dismissed. Her relationship with Chris had been determined yesterday, but Toby was quite another matter. Walking back with him through the wood yesterday she had realised with increasing dismay that nothing would ever be the same with Toby either.

Sooner or later the lighthearted flirting he teased her with was going to prove too hurtful to bear and she would be forced to do something about it. She could leave Trent House, of course, and find another post, but no other position would have nearly so much to offer.

Despite her brusque manner and, at times, short temper, she had grown quite fond of Lady Carmichael in the three months she had been with her, and she was certain that the affection was reciprocated, but the hardest part of all would be leaving Tole". Walking down that warm, sunlit hillside towards the sparkle and glint of the river below, she readily admitted to being in love with him, but he realisation brought her little joy.

To her dismay she felt the hot prickle of tears in her eyes when she thought about him, and shook her head, impatient with her own vulnerability. Toby was unattainable, she had known that from the beginning, and she was foolish to let it hurt so much. Perhaps leaving was the only answer, for otherwise she would be faced with such a mammoth

task of pretending that she doubted if she was capable of it.

The wood along the river bank meant the chance of meeting Chris, she realised suddenly, and at the moment she was simply not able to cope with what could be a difficult confrontation. Almost without thinking she veered across suddenly and headed down the south side of the hill towards the darkness of the pine wood.

Its gloomy chill was somehow keeping with her present mood and she shivered as she walked among the close standing trunks, her steps deadened on the softness of pine needles. She put her hands to cover the tops of her arms and wished she had worn a coat, for her skin crawled with the coldness of the air, but she would not turn back.

A bird flew from a bush some yards away, its shrill cries of protest making her lift her head in alarm, for she was too far away to have disturbed it herself. Shaking her head to deny any cause for such nervousness, she walked on, only to stop again after -a few steps when she heard a soft rustling sound behind her and slightly to her left.

It was possible that someone else was walking in the wood, of course, h it people passing in cars usually ventured no more than a few yards from the road, and the thought of it being Chris made her hesitate in her anxiety. His sudden appearance in front of he:, stepping from the shadow of the pine trees, brought an audible gasp from her and she stared at him for a moment with wide. wary eyes.

His grey eyes had a deep, dark look in the res-

tricted daylight admitted by the trees, and Isa stepped back instinctively, one hand to her throat in a defensive gesture that suggested alarm. She tried hard to keep her voice level and matter-of-fact, but it was not easy.

"Hello, Chris!"

He said nothing for so long that she began to wonder if he had decided not to speak to her at all, then he tilted back his head and looked at her from below half-closed lids, a cool, unfriendly look that dismissed any hope of his being any more reasonable this morning. A tight, closed look that would not forgive.

"Good morning, Isabella," he said, declining to use his more usual abbreviation of her name.

Isa glanced at him warily from below her lashes. Her heart was beating urgently hard at her side, although she had no real idea why his sudden appearance should make her so tremblingly nervous. Even after her dramatic flight from his cottage yesterday she was still prepared to be friends, or she had hoped it would be possible until now. Now she could *see* that Chris was interested only in something much more permanent and possessive than friendship and the way she felt about Toby precluded any hope of her changing her mind on that score.

"I—I hadn't expected to see you," she said. "Not here, this side of the grounds." The meeting could prove even more embarrassing than she had feared, and Isa found herself with the desire to run, anywhere, as long as it was away from there and **way**

from Chris and that cold, unfriendly gaze.

"Obviously!" he remarked acidly, and his mouth curled derisively at her embarrassment. "Just as I'd hoped to avoid seeing *you!*" he added maliciously. "It seems we've both failed!"

"Oh, Chris, please don't be so—so angry!" The plea was instinctive, and she had no other thought in mind but to banish that dark, unrelenting look that gave his handsome features such an unattractive hardness, but he looked at her with a sudden gleam in his eyes, as if he completely misread her intention.

"What's wrong, Isabella?" he asked harshly. "Isn't he interested in the hired help and you think I'll still be willing to marry you if you can get around me? Haven't you made the impression you hoped on *Mr. Carmichael?*"

"Chris!"

She stared at him, finding it hard to believe that he could be so harsh and unfeeling, or so maliciously spiteful, and she shook her head at the hurt it caused. He took a step nearer and, had it not been for the way her legs were trembling, she would have retreated before him, as it was she simply stared at him in disbelief. Hatred was a new experience for her, and it gave her a cold sense of helplessness to realise that any love he might have felt for her was now completely overwhelmed by the same bitter dislike and contempt he felt for Toby.

"I could have told you," he went on in a chill, quiet voice. "Toby Carmichael has only one thing

in mind, and you wouldn't stand for that at all, would you, Isabella? You want marriage and all the trimmings, but not with me—I wasn't what you had in mind at all, was I?" His eyes glittered brightly with malice in the cool shadows of the trees and Isa shivered as she fought with a rising sense of panic. "Were you really fool enough," he jeered, "to suppose he'd treat you any different from the rest?"

"The way you meant to treat Faith Merton," Isa said, desperately seeking relief from her own hurt by inflicting some in turn, and Chris stared at her for a moment, his grey eyes dark and angry, a flush darkening his good-looking features.

"Oh yes, of course," he said very softly at last. "He *would* tell you that !"

"Isn't it true?" Isa asked, and a shuddering intake of breath made her voice shake uncontrollably.

Chris narrowed his eyes, making the admission defiantly, as if he refused to have a conscience about it, no matter what other people thought. "Yes, it's true he said harshly. "I asked Faith Merton to come and live with me, and if Carmichael hadn't interfered she would have come !"

"A girl of seventeen?" Isa found it hard to swallow, even on his own admission, and she looked at him with more regret than condemnation. "Didn't her parents object?"

"Of course they objected," Chris admitted impatiently. "That's what gave him his excuse to interfere!"

"Someone had to," Isa suggested quietly, her own

problems briefly overshadowed by the ghost of an episode that must have made Chris hate his antagonist even more bitterly.

"You think he should have a monopoly on promiscuity?" he demanded harshly. "As for the girl being no more than seventeen, she was no more naive than you are, and you'd go to *him* willingly enough if he'd have you!"

"Not—not go to him," Isa denied, finding it hard to control her voice. "As you said, Chris, I only want marriage and all the trimmings, and no matter what you think, 'I'm *not* fool enough to think I can ever have them with Toby.'"

"I would have married you," Chris reminded her, still in the same chilling voice, "but that wasn't good enough for you, was it? You have to have the great lover himself 1"

"Chris—please don't !"

She put her hands to her ears and looked at him with wide appealing eyes, but to Chris it was a moment of vengeance and he meant to extract the last vestige of satisfaction from it. "So you really are in love with him ' " In some twisted way it seemed to give him satisfaction to see it so plainly evident in her eyes. "Well, I'm glad," he said harshly. "Now you know how it feels!"

She could bear no more—and especially not from Chris whom she had looked upon as someone who loved her and would not hurt her. She looked at him for a moment, tears bright and shining in her eyes, then turned suddenly and ran.

Her legs felt oddly weak and she could hear noth-

ing as she went, for the heartbeat that drummed loudly in her ears and she did not yet see the similarity to yesterday, when she had fled from the cottage. This time, however, Chris was not following; he did not even call after her and she knew he would still be standing there, angry and resentful and not caring any more whether she ran away or not.

The carpet of pine needles made her retreat soundless but for the gasping sound of her breathing and the occasional crackle of dry branches as they broke before her headlong flight. She had no idea of the direction she was going, anxious only to put as much distance between herself and Chris as possible.

Several times she almost tripped and fell, but always recovered herself and ran on. There was no real path through the closely standing trees and she had nothing to guide her, nothing to tell her which way she was running, so that she simply fled blindly until a sudden swerve sent her pushing through a cluster of low-growing elder.

Without pause she pushed her way through and it was only when the ground seemed to open up beneath her that she realised where she was. The chill water of the hidden pool engulfed her almost at once and she screamed out in panic as she went in deeper, her mind whirling with visions of that long grey shape with sharp teeth. Pike or not, the creature had frightened her, and the thought of being in the water with it again was the last straw.

The slimy weed wrapped itself around her arms

and legs and even smeared itself across her face as she gasped for breath, while her legs kicked out frantically as she tried to regain the safety of the bank. It was bitterly cold, even colder than she remembered it from her last ducking, and her teeth were chattering as she hauled herself from the enveloping weed and on to the bank.

Coughing and spluttering, shivering with cold, she hauled herself out and collapsed in a wet and weeping heap just as someone emerged from the trees behind her. "Isabella!" The voice was anxious and for a brief second she thought it might be a contrite Chris come to her aid, but there was no mistaking the owner of that voice, nor the strong hands that suddenly lifted her and held her close, until the warmth of his body calmed her shivering.

He was on his knees beside her, heedless of the soaking wet state of her, or the clinging weed, that smelled as foul as ever it had and smeared the virgin whiteness of his shirt as he held her. One large hand pressed her tearful face to his chest and he rested his face on the damp, bedraggled chaos of her hair. "Isabella, ssh! It's all right, it's all right, you're not hurt! It's all right, little one, don't cry!"

The words whispered against her ear as he bent his head closer, his breath warm on her neck, his lips brushing the soft, damp skin gently, and for several moments Isa made no attempt to move but kept her eyes closed and let the tears run from between closed lids. It was ironic that she should be held in his arms so soon after admitting that she knew he would never feel anything in the least

serious for her, but she could not bring herself to break away yet, the strength of his arms was too comforting.

"Isabella?"

He held her at arm's length, looking down at her with a small half-smile on his face and a soft dark glow in his eyes that warmed her even more than his physical presence. "What happened?" he asked quietly, and Isa shook her head. Her instinct was to lay her head back on his chest and try to explain as best she could without looking at him, but he held her quite firmly with his hands on her arms and after a moment he got to his feet and gently helped her to hers.

She was stiff and cold and the weed clung to her like slimy lengths of tattered ribbon, but he seemed oblivious of it all and held her still by her arms as he looked down at her. "Tell me," he persuaded gently, "did you meet Chris Burrows?"

Isa glanced up swiftly, her lips parted, her eyes searching his face for some clue as to his knowledge.. "How—how do you know I've seen Chris?" she asked, and he smiled, shaking his head.

"I saw you both coming this way," he told her. "That's why I followed you, in case anything—happened."

"Nothing happened," Isa assured him, her heart fluttering wildly when she thought of him following along behind her because he feared something would happen between her and Chris if they met.

"Good!" He bent his head briefly and brushed his lips lightly across her forehead. "I'm glad I

don't have to punch him on the jaw—I wasn't really looking forward to it !"

"You—you'd have—" Isa shook her head when words failed her, her eyes huge and unbelieving, and Toby laughed.

"The best place for you is in a hot bath," he told her, and before she realised his intention he had lifted her into his arms and was carrying her back through the crowding elder at the edge of the pool.

"I hope you're not allergic to horses," he said, "because I've no other form of transport available."

"Toby, I can—"

"Shut up and sit still," Toby told her, hoisting her up on to the saddle of his waiting horse. "You can do all the talking you want to do after you've had a bath—at the moment you aren't fit for the company of man or beast, with all that stinking weed on you!"

She said no more, but sat clinging tightly to the saddle while he led the mare back up the hill to the house. There was plenty of time for her to say what she had to say, and this was not the moment to break the news to him that she had decided to leave his employ.

Isa felt much better and she surveyed herself in the dressing-table mirror with a certain amount of satisfaction. There were no signs of her experience left on her person, and the only evidence that all was not well was in the shadowy darkness of her eyes as she looked at her reflection. Now was the time to tell Toby that she must leave, but she must

not let him know her real reason, of course. Another job, perhaps, although he was bound to want to know where and with whom, and to wonder why she did not ask for a reference.

She sighed, deeply, and looked at her reflection again, brushing back the dark hair from her face and wondering if Lady Carmichael would comment on the almost black colour of her violet eyes and the faint shadows beneath them. It was not going to be easy, but nor would staying on at Trent House be easy, especially now that Toby was showing signs of treating her more like a lover. Without a feeling as deep and lasting as her own, she couldn't let it go on.

There was no one at all in the sitting-room when she looked in, and she frowned, briefly puzzled, then went along to the kitchen. No matter what catastrophes occurred, or what personal traumas she suffered, the dinner still had to be cooked and it was still her job to do it.

With her mind only half on what she was doing Isa turned on the oven and set about preparing a cold sweet, and she was in the middle of whipping cream when the kitchen door opened and Toby came in. For a moment she paused in her task and looked across at him warily, then, with her eyes hastily downcast, she went back to it.

"Feeling better?"

He asked the question softly and came to stand only about a foot away so that she could feel the warmth of him as she whirled the beater round and round in the cream, her arm occasionally brushing

against him The words she had to say seemed to stick in her throat and she was appalled to find herself more inclined to cry than to quietly inform him that she would- be leaving his employ.

"Yes, yes, thank you." She licked her lips and wished she could have brushed a hand across her eyes to remove the haze that hid her view of what she was doing.

"Can't you leave that for just a minute?" he asked, and Isa shook her head. "Why not?" Two large and insistent hands reached over and took the beater from her unresisting fingers, laying it down on the table and disregarding the mess it made or the brief, softly spoken objection she made. "Now look at me," Toby commanded.

"Toby, I have to make the—"

"You have to listen to me, little Isabella," he said softly, and turned her to face him, taking her hands in his, his thumbs moving with caressing persuasion on her wrists.

"No, Toby!" There was a hint of panic in her and she knew it, but she had to say what she must say now, before things got out of control again. Once Toby kissed her, as he obviously intended to do, she would find it much harder, perhaps even impossible, to tell him she was going and that she did not want to have an affair with him. She took advantage of his momentary surprise to have her say, although it was much more garbled and hasty than she had meant it to be.

"I'm leaving, I want to give you my notice. I know I have to work for some time yet, to work out a

notice or something, but I want to go, Toby, and—and I'm *giving* you notice now!"

"You're doing what?" He looked at her with bright, glittering eyes for a second and she was horribly unsure whether he was angry or amused, or just simply stunned by the announcement.

"I'm—I'm leaving—you, Trent House, I have to go!"

For a moment he said nothing, then he reached out a hand and just lightly touched her cheek with his fingertips causing the inevitable chaos to her senses. "Why?" he asked. "Why do you have to go, Isa? Is it anything to do with Chris Burrows?"

"No, oh no, there's nothing **now** with Chris—there never was really."

"Then why, sweetheart?" -

The endearment, spoken so softly in that deep, quiet voice, did incredible things to her heartbeat and she put a hand to her throat in a gesture that was vaguely defensive. "Please don't—please don't call me things like that," she said in a small, whispery voice. "I'd much rather you didn't, Toby!"

His blue eyes looked down at her for a long moment in silence, then he half smiled, that sensual lower lip pursed as he put a hand under her hair at the back of her neck and, gently stroked the soft skin. "I don't believe you," he said.

The hand behind her head was insistent in its pressure and his other hand was at her waist, drawing her to him until she was in his arms, held firmly against the bold, masculine warmth of his body, his face pressed to the softness of her neck, lips gently

persuasive as he spoke against her ear. "Why do you always fight me, Isabella?" he whispered. "It isn't because you don't like me, I'm vain enough to know that isn't true, so what is it?"

Isa kept her eyes closed and she was almost unaware of putting a hand to the side of his bowed head, her fingers stroking the dark hair above his ear. "I'm—I'm afraid," she confessed in a small voice, and his hands tightened their hold for a second before he raised his head and looked down at her with a frown between his brows.

"Afraid?" he echoed. "Of me?" She did not answer and he lifted her chin gently with one hand and held it while he kissed the trembling corners of her mouth. "Oh, why, my darling, are you afraid of me? Don't you know that I love you?"

Isa looked up then, her eyes wide and blank with disbelief, her lips parted as she tried to believe what he had said. "I—I don't want to be—" She hesitated, finding it hard to put Chris's harsh remarks into words. "I don't want to be just a—an affair, Toby. I couldn't bear that!"

"And Chris Burrows suggested that was all I had in mind for you, did he?" Toby asked. Isa nodded without speaking. "And you believed him?" This time she did not nod, and after a moment of telling silence he drew her close into his arms again, holding her so close she felt every muscle straining her to him. "Now believe *me!*" he said in a harsh whisper, and brought his mouth down forcefully over hers, parting her lips with the fierceness of his kiss, drawing every ounce of resistance from her.

It seemed like hours before *she* drew breath again and her head was spinning with the effect of it, like a runner who has reached the limits of endurance. Her pulses were pounding wildly and her heart seemed to have gone completely out of control, thudding crazily at her ribs and making her even more breathless. "Toby !" She had no idea what instinct made her do it, perhaps it was a reminder of other times, but she glanced over his shoulder at the row of bells on the board above the door, and Toby laughed. "You won't be saved by the bell this time, my love!" he told her with that wicked glitter of laughter in his blue eyes as he looked down at her. "Grandmama has been threatened with all manner of terrible fates if she dares to touch that bell while I'm in here with you! "

Isa stared at him, her eyes wide. "You—you've told Lady Carmichael what—where—"

"I told her I was coming in here to the kitchen to propose to you," Toby told her blandly. "Even Grandmama wouldn't want to interrupt that !"

"Propose to me?" Isa's heart lurched wildly and she felt suddenly as if everything she ever wanted to happen was happening at once. "Toby, I—"

"Will you?" Toby asked, without giving her time to finish, and Isa nodded, her head back, leaning against the enfolding arms.

"I love you," she said simply, and he gazed at her for a moment in silence, then swiftly he bent his dark head and buried his face in the soft riot of her freshly washed hair, his mouth warm and ardent against her soft skin as he kissed her neck and

throat and the little pulse that raced wildly at the base of her throat.

"Then marry me," he whispered. "Please, my darling, will you marry me?"

"Chris said I was a fool to ever think you would marry me," she said softly, and Toby looked up swiftly, his eyes glittering darkly blue between those long lashes.

"Three months ago," he said, "I'd have said he was bound to be right." He bent his head again and kissed her mouth slowly and lingeringly, his arms folding her yet more tightly to the curve of his own body. "You've had all the long summer to change my natural instincts," he whispered. "But I'm a willing convert, my darling."