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Afferty's Legacy

JANE CORRIE



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"Promise not to have anything to do with Patrick Rafferty," Carl asked. Teresa, loving him, wanted to agree. Yet how could she refuse to see her newly found uncle?

It was only then that she learned about the feud that had plagued their families for generations. And she knew that whatever had been held against her family would inevitably be leveled against her.

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CHAPTER ONE

TERESA

by her side, then down at the engagement ring he had slipped on her third finger not ten minutes ago, in front of a crowd of well-wishers.

It was hard for her to believe that so much had happened in such a short time, and most of it, she thought with a stab of sorrow, catastrophic.

Her gaze went back to Carl again; but he had changed all that, he had turned her world of loneliness into a place of light and hope. As she stood beside him accepting the congratulations of his friends, people she hoped she would soon know, her mind went back to the time she had first met the tall Australian by her side.

Even now, in the midst of so much happiness, Teresa was still able to feel the pain of that first meeting, and the news she had had to give him when he arrived at her home inquiring after her brother, and how she had to tell him that Rob had died in an air crash not two weeks previously, and not only her brother, but her mother also—in fact, all the family she had.

When Carl had given her his condolences, he asked if he might visit her again when she was more able to receive visitors, and Teresa had thought that he was just being kind and never dreamt that he meant it. But he had, and a fortnight later he re-

turned, and kept on returning. She learnt later that his original call had been a courtesy call, for he was captain of an Australian rugby team, and had met Rob, Teresa's brother, while on a tour of England.

It was through Rob's sporting connections that he had met his death, for he had wanted to watch an international game being played in France; a game he would have been taking part in had it not been for an ankle injury sustained the previous week. Had he taken the same flight as the rest of his team, Teresa would still have had a family, instead of finding herself utterly alone; but her mother had decided she would accompany her son, the attraction being a weekend in Paris, and had tried to inveigle Teresa into going with them, but Teresa had already made arrangements for that weekend and was staying with a friend of hers while her parents spent the weekend in Scotland visiting an elderly aunt of theirs. If Teresa's friend Jane had not had such a dread of spending two nights alone in their rambling old home, or if she had decided to join her parents on the duty visit, Teresa would have been on that fateful flight too; and there had since been black times when she wished she had been.

Carl's possessive arm stealing round her waist jerked her out of her musings, and her lovely green eyes met his blue ones, her heart leaping at the look of love in his. 'Happy, girl?' he asked softly.

Teresa's answer was in her eyes. 'You know I am,' she whispered.

'I'll take you up on that look later,' he said with a grin.

She was still looking at him, thinking for the

hundredth time how handsome he was, and how" lucky she was to have such a man fall in love with her, when she saw his easy-going smile fade, and a look of hardness replace the smile. Following his glance, she wondered what could have brought about such a swift and, she thought with surprise, furious reaction from him.

The small man now threading his way past the guests towards them wore an ill-pressed suit, and one, Teresa felt, that was only brought out for special occasions, for it was of a rather outdated style and contrasted blatantly with the well-dressed assembly.

Her eyes passed on to his face; he looked old, yet there was a springiness in his step that belied this conclusion, although his features were wrinkled and he was tanned a deep brown from exposure to the sun. His hair had once been a fiery red, as her hair had been until she had used a toner on it, sick of the quips she had had to put up with from the truck drivers who worked at the same firm she had been employed at; a distribution depot not far from her home.

Teresa had the strangest feeling that she ought to know this man, yet her memory remained blank, and as he drew nearer she saw that his eyes were a light blue, and there were several gaps in his front teeth when his smile widened as he reached them.

The silence puzzled Teresa, for the man's appearance had stopped everyone talking, and it seemed that all eyes were on him, waiting in silent expectancy.

On reaching Carl and Teresa, the man held out

one gnarled hand towards Carl, and with a wicked grin remarked in a voice that held an Irish lilt to it, 'Welcome to the family, boy. 'Tis a miracle, it is ! ' and turning to Teresa, held out his other hand to her. 'Oi'm your Uncle Patrick, girl,' he explained, and then gave her a hard stare from those blue eyes of his. 'Can't make out why your mam didn't tell me you were coming, or'—his glance went back to Carl standing stiff as a ramrod beside her—that you were marrying an Elton.' His grin widened. 'Guess I wouldn't have believed it, anyway.'

Teresa felt there had been a spark of maliciousness in this last remark, and held her hand out to his. 'You must forgive me,' she began hesitantly, remembering a little belatedly that her mother had spoken of a family connection in Australia, but there had been no contact for years, and Teresa had presumed that whatever connection there had been had died out.

She also realised with a pang that she would have to tell him about her mother and her brother, but decided it might be better to impart the sad news to him in private, and waited for a lead from Carl.

Carl's lead was hardly a helpful one, for utterly ignoring the man's still outstretched hand, he said in a voice Teresa hardly recognised, 'I don't recall inviting you to this party.'

Teresa gave a shocked, 'Carl I'

Her newly-acquired uncle, however, showed no such startled reaction, but only shook his head sadly and tut-tutted, "'Tis a mighty shame, girl, that by-gones can't be by-gones at a wonderful time like this.'

Teresa was utterly confused, and when Carl said

in an icy voice, 'I think we'd better adjourn to a more private spot,' she felt she couldn't get out of the room fast enough. It was as if there was a time bomb ticking beside them that at any moment might blast the room apart.

In frigid silence Carl led the way to his office at the back of the sumptuously appointed homestead, leaving a bewildered Teresa and a doleful-looking uncle to follow, although she had a distinct impression that the sad look on her uncle's face completely masked another emotion, and again she felt that in an odd way he was vastly enjoying himself.

Carl's first words were addressed to Teresa. 'Do you admit that this man is your uncle?' he demanded.

Teresa's gorgeous eyes widened: for goodness' sake, she wondered, what heinous crime had her uncle committed to cause this commotion? 'I suppose he must be,' she said slowly. 'I mean,' she added hastily, not wishing to offend the poor man who had claimed her as his niece, 'I must be related to him, mustn't I? I do know Mother used to speak of a family connection in Australia, but that was years ago.' She looked at her uncle. 'You never kept in touch,' she accused him gently, 'so naturally I wouldn't have thought of contacting you.'

Her uncle's blue eyes rested on the rich mahogany desk, then came back to Carl, who was watching him with cold eyes. 'Your mam's name was Maureen, right?' he asked Teresa, not bothering to answer her accusation but intent only on proving their relationship. 'And your Granddad's name was Daniel Rafferty, right?'

Teresa nodded affirmatively, and did not see the grim set of Carl's mouth at the confirmation.

Flinging a look that could only be described as triumphant towards Carl, he muttered, 'Not that I needed to prove it; she's a Rafferty okay; one look at those eyes and I'd have known her anywhere—although,' he added woefully, 'only the Dear knows what the child's done to her hair.'

With an indignant gasp, Teresa answered quickly, 'I had to do something; it's not funny being continually addressed as Red!'

Carl walked to the door of the office and held it open, and looking at Patrick Rafferty, said harshly, 'You've had your fun, now get out.'

The small man shrugged, not a bit offended at the curt dismissal, and looked at Teresa. 'I'm kin, girl,' he said in that soft lilting voice of his. 'I don't blame you if you want to disown me—only just you remember I'm around if you don't fit in.' With that, he left without a backward glance at either Teresa or Carl.

'Teresa, I want you to promise not to have any dealings or contact with Patrick Rafferty,' Carl ordered in a tightly controlled voice.

Teresa looked at him, hardly able to believe her ears; he was looking out of the windows with his back to her, and she saw the way he held himself stiff and straight with no sign of relaxation even though they were now alone. 'I feel I ought to warn you,' he went on in a cold impersonal voice, 'that if you disobey me there will be no chance of happiness in our marriage.'

Her shocked senses tried to sort out the implica-

tions of this ultimatum, for that was what it had been, even in her befuddled state she had grasped that much. In other words disown her uncle, for there was no doubt that Patrick Rafferty was her uncle. She looked back at Carl, still gazing out at the paddocks beyond the homestead waiting for her answer.

He was only an arm's length away yet Teresa felt he had moved miles away from her, and a feeling of desolation crept over her, making her want to throw herself at him.

What was Patrick Rafferty to her anyway? Blood relation, yes, she wasn't denying that, but who had been the one to lift her out of the darkness and give her life meaning? Carl—it was Carl's shoulder that she had wept on, and Carl who had gently dried her tears and filled her days with thoughts of the future as his wife; of the ranch he owned, and the homestead she would become mistress of.

Teresa did not hesitate. Her hand reached out for his, certain that she wouldn't even have to speak, for he would see her answer; it was there in her eyes.

At the touch of her hand Carl looked down at her. His fingers did not close around hers but left them clinging to his, and Teresa felt a tremor of shock pass through her as her eyes met the blue enigmatic ones of his. There was no love there now; it was as if he were seeing her with different eyes—as a Rafferty, she thought bewilderedly, and she knew with heartbreaking certainty that whatever her answer would have been, he would always see the Rafferty connection there. She didn't understand why the name was so abhorrent to him, and she felt that it

wasn't just her uncle but the name Rafferty that had sent her new-found happiness crumbling into ashes at her feet.

With a spurt of surprise she acknowledged one essential fact—Carl had never loved her! It was her looks that he had fallen for, for Teresa was a beauty by any standards, and had she needed confirmation on this point the countless men who had pestered her for dates would have given it to her.

Carl was just like all the others, she thought with a pang of sorrow; it was the wrapping he had fallen for, not the person she was. He had seen her as a beautiful possession he had commandeered for his home—something he had picked up abroad, she thought wildly; and that something had turned out a fake—not only a fake, but a Rafferty, and that he couldn't take.

Whatever he held against her kith and kin would, at some time or another, be levelled against her, and Teresa knew what her answer had to be.

Without looking at the ring on her finger she slipped it off and put it on the desk in front of her; there was no need for words here either, her action had said it all.

She watched dully as his gaze went to the ring now sitting in solitary glory on the table, then back to her partially blank eyes.

'I brought you over,' he said stiffly. 'I'll make arrangements for your return home, if that's what you'd prefer.'

Where was home? Teresa thought blankly. She had no home; nothing except an uncle nobody seemed prepared to want to know.

Her expression must have shown her thoughts,

for he said harshly, 'You're not considering joining that old devil, are you? Because if you are, I'd advise strongly against it. He can barely scrape a living as it is. I'll fix you up with work here. It's the least I can do under the circumstances.'

Teresa found herself wanting to laugh hysterically at his reluctant admission of his commitment to her, but she swallowed the urge to give way to hysteria. Her pride kept her on an even keel, and she even managed a small, if bitter, smile at him. 'Thank you, I'd rather not put you to that trouble. It appears I'm lucky in having a relative, even if he is a Rafferty,' and on these words she made for the door, feeling unable to cope with any further debate on her future, and did not even turn round at Carl's shouted, 'Teresa—wait I '

She made straight for her room, and for the first time since she had arrived two days ago, did not stand and admire the beautifully furnished bedroom she had been given, but got out her case and started packing.

One part of her was fully conscious of what she was doing; she wanted enough clothes to last her for as long as it took her to get settled in her uncle's home, or in an hotel in the nearby small township; the rest, she told herself wearily, could follow on later.

That same part of her—the one that knew exactly what was happening, as against the other part of her that couldn't accept as yet that her world lay in ashes—also knew no surprise that Carl had not followed her and pleaded with her to stay, telling her that it had all been a shock to him, and that no matter who she was, he still loved her; for that part of

her knew everything, and knew he wouldn't, he was too relieved that he had been released from such an embarrassing connection.

When her case was packed, Teresa slipped on her light coat and collected her handbag, and without a backward glance left the room and made her way down to the front of the house and let herself out of the front door.

A shape detached itself from a covered porchway. It was her uncle; and he had obviously been waiting for her. Taking her case from her, he said in a mournful voice, 'Guess I knew he wouldn't be able to take it. Sorry, girl, but I had to do it.' He said no more, but Teresa barely heard him, and felt herself guided towards a very dilapidated-looking van drawn up behind the gleaming cars of the guests. Again the urge to laugh uncontrollably seized her, and again she pushed the temptation away and forced herself to remain calm.

Teresa never clearly remembered reaching her uncle's home. She knew he talked a lot about this and that, as if he realised the need to keep her mind off certain matters, and when they drew up in front of a small chalet-style house, badly in need of a coat of paint, her uncle climbed out and remarked a little shamefacedly, 'Tis a little on the shabby side, girl, but you'll be mighty welcome here.'

At that particular time Teresa wouldn't have minded if the place had been a log cabin; she was past any comments on the matter, only knowing that as her uncle had just said, here she was welcome, and at Sunset Ridge, the Elton homestead, she wasn't.

CHAPTER TWO

BARELY noticing the shabby furniture and curtains that could do with a wash, Teresa allowed herself to be led into what appeared to be a sitting-room, only there was hardly any space in which to sit. Each chair was loaded down with either papers or books, and on one, what looked suspiciously like a pile of clothes was waiting to be ironed.

At least, she told herself dully, she would not only be welcome there, it looked as if she was needed too, and it didn't look as if she would have much time to mope. For that she was grateful, for she had gathered that her uncle was a bachelor who suffered the casual ministrations of one Mrs Hanney, who would come and sort out the place when the mood was on her, which, Teresa surmised, did not happen often.

Her uncle quickly made a space for her to sit down, gathering the papers up and putting them on a table with a shamefaced grin, and said, 'Sure, I'd better mend me ways now, girl,' then perched himself on the arm of one of the armchairs and studied her with concern. 'Now, how about a nice cup of tea?' he queried.

Teresa felt the tears spring up behind her eyes and quickly blinked them back, but she couldn't speak, just nodded as she watched him go out of the room. The unwelcome thought that she would have to tell him about her mother and brother hovered

uneasily at the back of her mind, and she closed her eyes. As if she hadn't had enough for one day!

While she waited for her uncle to reappear with the tea, she forced her mind away from the heart-break so near the surface. She wouldn't, couldn't, think of Carl and what had happened.

Mercifully he was not long, and carrying a tray that also looked as if it could do with some attention such as a good polish, he laid it down on a side table after pushing off a pile of ancient magazines.

Handing her a cup of tea, he commented kindly, list you get that down you.'

The tea was very strong, but Teresa was too weary to ask for more milk in it and sipped the hot dark liquid. A few seconds later she was coughing and spluttering and her eyes were watering; this time not from sorrow, but from whatever it was that he had put in the tea.

Instead of looking concerned, her uncle grinned at her. 'Brandy, girl; get it down you, you could do with a bit of propping up.'

Teresa blinked back the tears and nodded mutely, then sipped the sweet fiery liquid, grateful for anything to help her through this bad time.

When she had finished she really did feel more able to cope; enough, anyway, to say what had to be said, and told him about the air crash.

For a short while afterwards her uncle sat staring at the worn lino on the floor, then abruptly he went back into the kitchen, and Teresa knew he had gone to give himself a dose of the same liquid courage he had given her.

When he came back, he was shaking his head.

'You poor wee mite,' was all he could say for a few seconds, then shook his head again, and his brow darkened. 'And fool that I was, I made things worse for you.' He sat down heavily on the chair arm again. 'It explains why our Maureen didn't tell me about you and Elton.' He sighed heavily. 'I thought maybe she'd hoped things had blown over like, though that didn't make sense, but it was all I could come up with.'

He looked across at Teresa, who was now feeling the full effects of the liberal dose of brandy, and her lids were heavy, although she was making a valiant attempt to keep awake. There was so much she wanted to know, but she was too tired to pursue the matter.

'What you need, girl, is a good night's sleep,' her uncle said, and Teresa made herself sit up straighter as if to prove she was all right—or would be, if she could only shake off this feeling of numbness. She would have liked nothing better than to be able to lie down and sink into oblivion, but her tired brain assessed the unlikely possibility of there being a spare room, and if there were, if it was in a fit state to accommodate her.

Her uncle settled the matter for her, and clearing his throat, he said, 'I maybe thought you might be needing a place to go to. I kinda hoped you'd agree to stay a while.' His gaze settled once more on the lino, and she saw his features harden as he muttered, 'And glad I am too. As I said afore, we're kin, girl, and if you've a mind, I'd be right grateful if you'd consider staying now that you're here.'

Teresa nodded dumbly. She didn't have any-

where else to go anyway, for there was nothing in England for her now; all ties had been severed when she left.

A few minutes later she was shown round the chalet, and finally to her room which was located in an added wing tacked on to the building. 'You'll get plenty of peace here, girl,' her uncle commented. 'I have to be up early, so I won't disturb you; my room's back in the main section of the place.'

With a start, Teresa realised she didn't know what her uncle did for a living, but she was too tired to ask. There would be plenty of time in the future, she told herself dully—all the time in the world.

Not long afterwards, she took a quick shower, and was soon climbing gratefully into the small camp bed in the spare room. The cover was plain but clean, and so were the sheets. Half of her saw these things, the other half saw the room she had been given at Sunset Ridge and her heart cried out to Carl. He hadn't meant what he'd said, she told herself; tomorrow he would be round to beg her forgiveness, to say that nothing mattered so long as they were together. And on these thoughts she fell into an exhausted sleep.

The following morning however, Teresa's hopes were not fulfilled. A day went by, then two, then a week, with no sign of Carl.

She tried not to run to the telephone each time it rang, or raise her hopes too high each time she answered it, for it was always someone 'wanting her uncle or wanting to leave a message for him, and these would come from the local auction sales, for this was how her uncle earned his living, by trucking

livestock from sales to outlying farms.

The work could hardly be called lucrative, and Teresa, recalling Carl's words about her uncle barely being able to support himself, started to worry about this, for she couldn't see how he could be expected to support her as well.

Somehow she had to bring up the subject of getting a job of some kind and paying her way without hurting her uncle, and this wasn't going to be easy, for he was a proud man, and never failed to show appreciation for even the smallest task Teresa carried out as she made the chalet into a real home, a task she had set about with a fervour almost amounting to fanaticism. She gave herself no time to mope, there were things to be done, curtains to be washed; windows likewise, chair covers and mats—nothing escaped Teresa's busy hands; tables were polished, the lino was given a new lease of life, and said thank-you by shining as if new.

When everything was right, Teresa promised herself, she would set about getting that job, although she hadn't much of a clue about the sort of job she could obtain, for as yet she didn't know much about the immediate territory and what chances of employment there were, if any. If she had been a man she could have assisted her uncle, for she could drive, but she was terrified of cattle and would prove more of a liability than a help in this respect.

Teresa stared at the sitting-room wall where a large patch of damp had ruined the wallpaper; now, if she had a job and could contribute towards her keep, there might just be enough left over to save

towards getting those tiles back on the roof, and prevent the rainwater from seeping through, and if that were done then the room could be repapered.

Thoughts on these lines gave her the incentive she so badly needed, and all other thoughts were pushed to the back of her mind. Carl had not come; and as the days slipped by, Teresa was able to catch a glimpse of what lay behind her uncle's reasoning in claiming their relationship, and, in a sense, why he had derived so much satisfaction from not only intervening, but as it were carrying off the intended bride from under the autocratic groom's nose.

The story came out in intermittent intervals during the evenings of that first week, and Teresa learned of the feud that had gone on between the two families for almost a decade.

'I couldn't have let you marry him, girl,' Patrick told her. 'I could have kept my mouth shut, of course, but eventually he'd have found out about the connection, and I wouldn't have given much for your chance of happiness then.'

Teresa remembered that this had been what Carl had more or less hinted himself.

'I couldn't do it any other way, either,' he said abruptly, frowning as he recalled the scene. 'Lucky for you that nothing an Elton does goes unnoticed in these parts, and like everybody else I'd heard he'd brought a girl back with him, and that they were getting married.'

He chewed on his lower lip as he marshalled his thoughts. 'If Joe Spang hadn't mentioned the name of Cottam, I guess you'd still be up at the big house, and none of us any the wiser until it was too late.' He

looked at Teresa, now carefully studying her hands. 'Joe works for Elton, in the stables,' he explained. 'And when he said you had a look of the Raffertys-well, that kinda clinched it for me, and I remembered the last letter that passed between your mam and me, and in it she'd told me she'd had a daughter.' He rubbed a work-roughened hand over his chin. 'I'm no letter-writer, girl. I guess I left it all to your mam; as long as she were okay, well, that was that. Time passed, and we kinda lost touch. My fault it was at that; I couldn't be bothered to put pen to paper, 'sides, weren't much I had to write about anyway.' He studied his boots. 'Would be about twenty years ago, I guess, since she wrote, I mean.'

Teresa nodded dumbly. She was twenty-one.

'If I'd known a mite earlier,' continued her uncle, 'about you and Elton, it wouldn't have got to the party stage, but I didn't. Joe only told me an hour or so before I gatecrashed that party. 'Course, I could have been wrong, but I couldn't let it go. Cottam ain't an ordinary name and Joe went to school with our Maureen, and he'd spotted the likeness.'

The more Teresa learnt about the feud, the more she realised that there was no chance of a reconciliation between Carl and herself.

It had all started way back in her great-grandfather's time, and began over a card game between Mike Rafferty and a Jonathan Elton—at that time neighbours and friends, both of whom loved a gamble, and neither knew when to stop. On this particular night Jonathan Elton was losing heavily and had run out of cash, and having nothing else to play

with he had staked part of his land on the turn of the last card, and had lost that too.

Afterwards a bitter quarrel had developed between the two men, for Elton had claimed that he was drunk when he made the bet, and that Mike Rafferty should have known it.

Teresa had asked if it were true, and if her great-grandfather had taken advantage of Jonathan Elton, and was a little shocked by the twinkle in her uncle's eye as he replied airily, 'Oh, sure, I guess he must have done. He got a paper, signed and sealed, out of him before that last card was played, and no matter how many high and mighty city lawyers they got to work on it, that bit of paper gave him the land.'

Her eyes went to her hands. One piece of land, she thought dully, all those years ago. It didn't seem possible that some sort of settlement couldn't have been arranged, and she recalled Carl's expression when he had looked at her uncle; almost as if it had happened yesterday, and he was the actual offender instead of just carrying the name of Rafferty.

'That was jist the start,' went on her uncle. 'From then on old Jonathan Elton was out to get even. He meant to break us—and he did,' he said slowly, his eyes narrowing in memory. 'In the old days they used to share a water hole on Elton's land; well, that was fenced in for a start. We had a goodly sized herd at that time, but one by one we lost 'em. Can't keep cattle where there's no water,' he shrugged. 'Guess we didn't have much choice in the end but to keep things going best way we could. We broke those fences down and let our beasts stray on to their land.'

He frowned heavily. 'There were rustling charges levelled against us, but in them days it was a case of the pot calling the kettle black. We didn't get some of our cattle back, and had some of theirs in lieu, as you might say.'

He stared around at the poorly furnished room. 'And this is all we've left,' he said bitterly. 'This and that damned piece of land out there. The Eltons have gone from strength to strength. They own half the county, and the land this place is built on. It wouldn't surprise me to know that he owned this place as well. I ask no questions these days, jist pays me rent at the office in town.'

Teresa's gaze centred on the damp patch on the wall, and Patrick followed her look. 'I know other places on the books,' he said slowly, 'they've all been done up—no expense spared. That's why I'm sure he owns the place. He'd let it rot before he lifts a hand to help a Rafferty.'

The stricken look in Teresa's eyes did not go unnoticed, and he nodded grimly. 'He's an Elton through and through, Teresa. Had it been anyone else but him, I guess there might have been a chance of things working out, but he's old Jonathan Elton all over again. As far as he's concerned we're thieves and vagabonds, and always will be.' He leant towards Teresa. 'Do you see how it is now, girl?' he said gently.

Teresa had said nothing, but swallowed and nodded wearily.

Her uncle was silent for a few seconds, then said abruptly, 'History repeating itself. Or would be, if it were the other way round, only this time it was the

Raffertys' turn to break things up.'

There had been a slight hint of satisfaction in his voice that made Teresa glance quickly at him.

'Been doing a bit of thinking about the past,' he explained carefully. 'Going back.' He scratched his chin thoughtfully. 'Seems it's the answer, like, to things that didn't make sense, like you not knowing how things were here, and picking an Elton.' He raised a hand to stem Teresa's quick response. 'Sure, I know your mam was gone when you met him, but I couldn't make out why she'd held her peace afore, about the feud. I mean, considering it was the reason she took off all those years ago.'

Teresa stared at him—her mother? She waited for him to go on, which he did after a few seconds. 'James Elton, it was,' he began slowly, as if sorting out the facts in his mind. 'He took a real shine to our Maureen, he was always hanging around. She was a looker in those days, girl, like you,' he gave a half-smile at the memory, 'and as proud as they come. She could have taken her pick at that, there were no shortage of likely swains.' He sighed heavily. 'But like I said, there was this Elton,' he screwed his eyes up in thought. 'He would have been Carl Elton's uncle, I guess.' He shook his head impatiently. 'No mind, he's gone now, but it was around the time that he began to look at Maureen when she was offered this job as nursemaid to some kids of a rich family that was going back to the old country. The offer came out of the blue, but we knew full well who'd put them up to it. As I said, this James had it real bad, and the Eltons weren't taking any chances of the pair making a match of it.'

Teresa's lovely eyes widened as she digested this information, and she watched her uncle get out his tobacco pouch and take his time in rolling a cigarette before resuming the narration.

He took a quick pull at the thin wafer in his hand and expelled the smoke slowly, then continued: 'I guess our girl saw the writing on the wall. I've a feeling she was just as soft on him as he was on her, but she knew the drill well enough, and that there was no future in it, so she accepted the job.'

He sighed. 'Well, a job's a job after all, and it was a chance to see the world—more than she'd ever see if she stayed here.' He grinned at Teresa. 'Seems like she made the right decision. She met your dad soon afterwards, and from what she told me in those early letters, I guess she was happy enough.'

Although tired, Teresa's mind was too active for sleep that night, and as she lay in the narrow bed her thoughts were centred on the extraordinary story her uncle had told her about her mother and James Elton, and particularly on her uncle's ruminations that she had loved this man.

Teresa recalled finding a faded rose and an equally faded card in her mother's dressing table drawer, tucked away out of sight, and her puzzlement over the discovery at the time, for the card had read simply, 'Love, James'. And that was indeed odd, as her father's name had been John, but as it had been a puzzle that was unlikely to be solved, Teresa had pushed it out of her mind. She had had more pressing matters to attend to at that time; but she knew the answer now.

A tiny tear escaped from under her closed lids. So her mother had loved James Elton; enough to have preserved that rose and card—enough, she thought wearily, to never mention the feud, or indeed elaborate on her earlier life in Australia, apart from the fact that they had relations out there.

She had wanted to bury the past, Teresa thought wildly, but I'm living it. A sob caught in her throat, and the tears held back for so long cascaded down her cheeks, and brought relief of a kind to her.

As unhappy as she was, Teresa couldn't blame her mother for not forewarning her or Rob about the slim likelihood of either of them ever meeting an Elton, and the probable consequences. She wouldn't have thought it possible that history would be repeated, but it had been, and the heartbreak was just as real now as it had been all those years ago for her mother.

On the thought of Rob, her tears fell faster. How he would have chuckled about the whole thing; about a feud that went on after all those years. He would have found it, as Teresa had, hard to believe in such goings-on. Although Rob had been a year younger than his sister, he had always seemed wiser than his years, probably, Teresa used to think, because he had had to assume responsibility for the family in his early teens when their father died. She knew, too, what advice he would have given her now; he would have told her to forget Carl Elton, for a man who could nurse a grievance about something that had happened long before his time wasn't worth a candle, and couldn't have loved her anyway.

Not that Teresa needed to be told these things,

she didn't, but it didn't make things any easier for her. No matter what, she still loved Carl, would always do, even if it was only for what he'd done for her when her world had come to a full stop. In some indefinable way, all her love for her mother and brother had been transferred to him, and in him had lain the centre of her world.

Her unhappy thoughts roamed on; she couldn't entirely blame the Eltons, for she couldn't see the Raffertys calmly sitting back and taking their just retribution for the underhanded way they had gained that piece of land—to make a man sign a document when he was befuddled with drink was no better than stealing, and that, Teresa thought miserably, from a man who had been a friend; no, she couldn't condone that under any circumstances.

There was no doubt that her mother had felt the same way, and that that was why she had accepted the job that took her right out of the country, for there would have been slim chance of happiness with such a background.

So, she thought wearily, it had gone on, attack and counter-attack, a sort of guerilla war, until it had turned into just petty annoyances. For it was petty now, and somehow pathetic.

It was beyond her comprehension as to why Carl had carried on the miserable business. Uncle Patrick was no longer young; he was also very poor, and Teresa couldn't understand why he should arouse such patent animosity in Carl. It ought to be pity that Carl felt for him, for Carl had land and wealth.

She sighed as she recalled the underlying note of satisfaction in her uncle's voice when he had intro-

duced himself to her at the engagement party, and although he had had to do it, she wished he had chosen a less blatant way.

With an impatient movement Teresa turned over on to her side in an effort to push this memory away from her, and as she did so her uncle's voice reached through to her memory. 'This is all we've got,' he'd said. 'This, and that damned piece of land.'

Teresa jerked up in bed; the land! That was why Carl hadn't forgiven them. They still had the land! Her brows creased; just how big was this piece of land that had caused her so much unhappiness? Not only her, but her mother also.

Although she didn't know much about Australia, she did know that land was more prized there than in England. It was a man's living, his very existence, in fact.

She sank slowly back on to the pillow again; that piece of land would have to be given back to the Eltons. She didn't know how she was going to accomplish this, but it had to be done—not because she hoped it would bring Carl back to her, she didn't want him to feel obliged to her in any way, for she had her pride; no, it was because it was time things were put right.

This Rafferty, she thought grimly, would not be able to hold her head high until the records were put straight.

By now her thoughts were drowsy ones, and when sleep claimed her she was still working out ways and means of returning the land to its rightful owner.

CHAPTER THREE

THE following morning, Teresa woke with a heavy head. Having eased some of the heartache out of her, she was now emotionally drained.

With almost cold calculation she applied her mind to the task of somehow forcing her uncle to give up his claim on the land that really belonged to Carl.

She had badly needed an objective to prevent her from falling into total despair, and this would surely fit the bill. She, more than anyone else, had a right to make it her business to wipe the stigma completely off the books, and her uncle had to be made to see things that way.

Having showered and dressed, Teresa was on the point of leaving her room when her uncle called out to her that he had to be off, but there was some hot coffee on the stove and he'd be back for lunch.

Glancing at her watch, Teresa was surprised to see that it was eight o'clock. She frowned; she had meant to be up early enough to see that her uncle had a good breakfast, although when she had first suggested she would do this he had -.told her he 'rarely bothered with breakfast. There were always cafés, he had said, that he could stop off at if he felt peckish. But Teresa suspected that he never gave himself time to sit down and enjoy a meal before he left, and now that she was here she would see that

he did so. He was no longer young, and it was about time he took things a little more slowly.

She drank some coffee but did not bother to get herself a meal; she had no appetite anyway. Afterwards she did some cleaning, odd jobs that had been put aside until the more urgent ones had been done, and when they were finished she turned her attention to the overgrown back garden.

When all the weeds were cleared, she thought, she would plant some vegetables. It was a waste of good space not to grow a certain amount of food, and Teresa had always wanted to grow things like lettuces and carrots. Of course, she mused as she stared round at the weed-tangled plot of land, she didn't know much about what she could grow. She had heard of 'dry spells' and the 'wet' that could go on for weeks, but she wasn't sure if this applied to this part of New South Wales, although Carl had said droughts were possible, and it wasn't too long ago that they had had a bad one.

Teresa bent determinedly over a patch of weeds and started pulling them up; there she went again—it appeared she couldn't even concentrate on this simple task without remembering something Carl had said. Well, that was something she would have to cure in the future.

She had cleared a small patch and was just wondering where she ought to pile the weeds she had pulled up possibly for burning later, when a man in green overalls appeared from the front of the chalet.

'Tried knocking,' he said with a grin, 'so I thought there might be someone round the back. Okay if we

get cracking? Ought to be able to fix that roof by midday.'

Teresa stared at the man; had her uncle got someone on the job? If so, he hadn't said anything to her, and she was sure he would have mentioned it.

With a start she realised that the man hadn't waited for her answer, but had disappeared round to the front of the house again, and Teresa, with a horrible feeling that they had got the wrong house and a vision of her uncle's horror at the thought of being presented with a huge bill for repairs in the not too distant future, was suddenly galvanised into action. She must ascertain that he had ordered the repairs.

The ladders were up against the front of the chalet, and the work was already well in hand. The tiles to be fitted on the gaps in the roof were laid out ready for use beside the ladder when Teresa, on the point of calling out to the man perched on the top of the ladder, saw the van parked a little way down the road.

The cream and maroon colours of the van made her question unnecessary, for they were the colours of all vehicles belonging to Sunset Ridge—Carl's ranch! Her throat constricted painfully as she gazed at the familiar colours, and not trusting herself to speak to the man who had by now seen her and given her another cheery grin, she went back into the chalet.

So her uncle had been right, he did own the chalet! Was it conscience that had made him order the repairs to be carried out? Of course it was! she told herself bitterly. Just a rich man's way of saying 'sorry'.

Her small hands clenched into fists. If only they could pay for the repairs, show him they didn't want his charity or his pity—at least she didn't, and she was sure that Uncle Patrick felt the same way.

When Teresa's uncle arrived for lunch, the workman had gone for his meal. The roof was finished, but he'd promised to be back that afternoon to have a look round inside the chalet and take a few notes of the repairs, if any, that were required, such as plumbing or plaster cracks.

Eating the light lunch Teresa had prepared for him, her uncle took the news with more calm than she had shown. 'Seems he's got a conscience after all,' he commented drily. "Bout time that roof was fixed.'

Teresa put her knife and fork down with a clatter. She hadn't been hungry to start with, and the philosophical way her uncle had taken the news had dampened any appetite she might have worked up. 'Conscience or not, I don't want his charity!' she declared vehemently.

Holding his cup out for a refill, her uncle nodded sagely. 'Spoken like a true Rafferty,' he remarked.

Teresa glared at him. 'Well, do you?' she demanded crossly.

Her uncle seemed to take his time in considering this question. 'Well now,' he said after a while, 'it's like this, girl. I don't want no Elton charity either, but I've got a spot of rheumatism in me right leg that's mighty grateful the place is going to be dry next time it rains.'

Effectively silenced, Teresa gazed down at the table; she ought to have thought of her uncle in-

stead of her own miserable plight.

She didn't have to say what she was thinking, her whole attitude showed it as she ruefully met his eyes. 'Well—if you put it that way,' she murmured, ending with a sigh.

He put his cup down and leaned towards her. 'Look, girl,' he said solemnly. 'I know how you feel; if we'd got the money then we'd chuck it at him—but we ain't, and that's a fact. 'Sides, I pays me rent, I'm entitled to me rights. You look at it that way.'

Teresa had already looked at it that way but still didn't like it, for it placed her under yet another obligation to Carl. As for money—surely she wouldn't get a better chance of bringing up the subject of getting a job?

Not looking at her uncle but concentrating on the condiment set, she said casually, 'I've been thinking about getting a job,' and went on hastily as she sensed him stiffen. 'I worked back home, you know, and I feel rather at a loss now that I've got the house straight. Besides,' she added firmly, 'I owe Carl my air fare out. It means nothing to him, but I'd sooner pay my way.' She swallowed quickly. 'I won't feel easy in my mind until I've paid him back, every penny of it.'

There was a short silence while her uncle digested this, then he sighed heavily. 'Okay, girl, I see how it is. Only wish I could settle that myself.' He screwed his eyes up. 'Kinda like to present him with it personally, like.'

Teresa said nothing; she did not intend it to be done that way, she had no intention of giving her uncle another opportunity of rekindling old fires,

but he wouldn't understand, so she held her peace. One thing at least had been accomplished, she had got her way over a job. The next thing was, where could *she* get one?

She put the question to her uncle, who gave the matter due thought. 'Secretary, eh?' he murmured, then scratched his chin. 'I'll have a word with Ken Oates, at the auction rooms. He's always moaning about shortage of staff.'

Teresa's eyes brightened. She hadn't realised how much she had been looking forward to getting back to work, and to be honest she was at the stage of accepting anything as long as it helped her to forget the past.

When her uncle returned later that evening, he told her it was all fixed up. Mr Oates had jumped at the chance to take on trained office staff. 'They all leave for the towns and the big money,' he explained to Teresa, 'there's not much in this one-horse town to hold 'em. Still, you'll be okay with Ken Oates. He's a fair man, and he'll give you the rate for the job okay.'

That weekend, her uncle took her round the district and showed her where the auction rooms were. He'd be able to take her down in the mornings, he said, but she would have to make her own way back in the afternoons as the chances were he'd be out on a job.

It was no great distance, Teresa noticed, for as Uncle Patrick had said, it was a very small town that had sprung up through necessity around the auction sales. There was only the one hotel, and two food stores that sold everything one could want in

that line, and a sort of haberdashery store. These were all contained in just the one street, and put Teresa in mind of a small village back home.

As she wandered from shop to shop, familiarising herself with the locality, she remembered Carl saying that they rarely bought supplies from the township, but ordered everything in bulk from Sydney, perhaps once or twice a year, when it was packed away in the ranch storeroom until required.

She also remembered Carl's casual, 'We're better stocked than the town is', and with it came another memory of him pulling her to him with a possessive hug and adding, 'Whatever my lady fancies will be there. Even dress materials and a good seamstress to make them up for you.'

Teresa blinked rapidly to dispel the mist that had formed over her eyes. Why had she to remember things like that? Why couldn't she pull a veil down on the past and forget it ever existed? There was no sense in torturing herself like this.

Later she was taken to the auction rooms and introduced to Mr Oates and Michael, his son, who turned frankly admiring eyes in her direction. Teresa instantly took to the short tubby auctioneer whom she was to work for in a week's time; as for his son, she decided to reserve her judgment there, for she was certainly not going to get involved again with any other man. Not for a very long time, if indeed, ever.

The visit had cheered her immensely, for her uncle had been right when he had said Mr Oates was eager to employ her. This much was obvious in his welcome to her, and he had been a little dis-

appointed when told she would not be starting work that Monday, but the next, for Teresa had decided to paper the sitting-room walls before she started work. Now that the roof had been repaired there was no reason why this shouldn't be done as soon as possible, and she was in a fever to cover up that damp patch that seemed to shout at her each time she entered the room.

All that remained now was to buy the paper, and Teresa had enough money to be able to do this; money she had been saving for essentials, but now that she had a job with an extremely good salary she had no worries in this direction. She could pay her way, and there would be enough left over for the odd little luxury—after, that was, she had put aside the amount she would be able to save each week towards paying Carl back the air fare. It might take a long time, but no matter how long it took, Teresa meant him to have that money.

A surprised Uncle Patrick found himself whisked into a store and confronted with various patterned wallpaper rolls before he guessed her intention, and after a lot of backchat between him and the store-keeper, eventually allowed himself to be persuaded to settle for Teresa's choice, although to be honest he wouldn't have argued with whatever she had chosen, he was too busy propounding the merits of a horse running that afternoon in the Sydney races.

Her uncle, Teresa noticed, thrived on arguments, and was not unpopular among the townsfolk. She was proudly introduced to each person they met who was acquainted with him. As she listened to him bandying words with the owner of the food store

while she waited for her order to be put up, she couldn't help thinking of the way Carl had treated him. Her lips twisted wryly. So Uncle Patrick wasn't a paragon of virtue, and was not likely to spoil a good story by telling the truth; nevertheless he was harmless, and certainly not the outright rogue that Carl had intimated he was.

If anything, she suspected, the town sided with her uncle. It could, of course, be a case of sympathising with the underdog, but Teresa didn't think so. Even a likeable villain made some enemies, it was inevitable, but there was no evidence of any ill-feeling among the local people.

She sighed as she collected the groceries; so it was pure bias on Carl's part. As her uncle had said, he was Jonathan Elton all over again.

On the way home, her uncle turned off the main road just before the turning to the chalet and guided the van down a track towards some pastureland, stopping by the side of some stout white fencing at the end of the track. For a moment or so he just sat gazing out across the expanse of land before him, then turned to Teresa and gave her a wry grin. 'Thought you'd like to see what all the fuss is about,' he said, and got out of the van and stood close to the fence.

Teresa didn't think 'fuss' was quite the right word, but she knew what her uncle wanted to show her, and joined him beside the fence.

At first he directed her attention to a white building to the right of them. 'That's the back of our place. Now look directly in front of it,' he ordered.

Teresa did so, and her eyes swept over the area

indicated. It was much larger than she had envisaged, well over an acre—probably two, she thought—and looked like a huge field that had been abandoned, for the grass was long and there was a look of desolation about it. Beyond it she could see the fencing of the boundary that must be Carl's ranch, and the contrast of the well-kept paddocks alongside the area brought the whole miserable business into sharp focus.

Why hadn't Uncle Patrick sold the land? Prices these days were high; or failing that, he could have leased it out for grazing rights. Teresa wondered if he felt the same way about it as she did; that he had no right to it. 'You didn't sell it, then?' she said slowly.

Her uncle gave her a quick look, then resumed his study of the land, and his answer was not what Teresa had hoped to hear. 'Nope,' he said firmly. 'Sure, that's what Elton would like us to do.'

His gaze left the land and travelled back to the chalet again and beyond. 'It's all his,' he said grimly, 'as far as you can see—'cept for that patch, and that's ours, girl. It's called Rafferty's Legacy, and when I'm gone it's yours, although only the Dear knows what you'll do with it. There ain't no one but Elton would buy it—not slap bang in the middle of his land, that is, and whoever did would be persuaded to sell it to him. Money would be no trouble, he'd pay twice what it's worth to get it back.'

Teresa had stopped listening when he had told her she would inherit Rafferty's Legacy. She didn't want any part of it. 'I would give it back to him,' she said fiercely, 'and I wouldn't take a penny piece for it '

Her uncle stared at her, then shook his head bewilderedly. 'Sure, it's enough to make old Mike turn in his grave,' he muttered.

'It would make him rest more easy,' Teresa commented bitterly, then just as suddenly as the bitterness had come it was gone, leaving her emotionally drained. What did it matter, anyway, what right had she to deprive her uncle of all that he had left? Hadn't they paid for the wretched land by now—in heartbreak alone it was surely theirs by right.

She swallowed and touched his arm. 'Take no notice of me, Uncle Patrick. I guess I'm a little soured.' She sighed. 'I just don't want to feel beholden to Carl in any way.'

Her uncle Patrick looked at her; her lovely green eyes were shimmering with unshed tears, and he stared back at the land again. 'I'll give it back,' he said sadly. 'If it'll make you happy, girl, then sure, that's what I'll do.'

Teresa blinked in astonishment and stared at him. 'I mean it,' he said more firmly now, as if the idea had caught his imagination. "Tain't no use anyway. Can't sell it, nor let it.'

Absently noticing how pronounced his Irish accent became when he was emotionally roused, Teresa knew he meant what he said, but wasn't too sure she ought to let him do it. She was, after all, only looking at it from her point of view. His next words, however, set her mind at rest.

'Guess it'll be worth it at that,' he muttered, still gazing out at the land. 'Kinda like to see his face when it's handed over.' He brought his gaze back to Teresa. 'I'll get it done legal-like. And what's more, I'll let him know it's in settlement of a debt.'

He grinned at Teresa. 'No need to worry about paying him your fare back, girl, guess that'll take care of that.' He chuckled. 'He won't like that one bit. It's not often I get the chance of saying keep the change to an Elton.' He nodded gently to himself. 'That land's worth a sight more than he's getting it for, and it'll kinda make a dent in that stiff-necked pride of his. It's a shame, it is, that he's away right now somewhere up north, so I'll have to hold me horses till he gets back.' He patted Teresa's arm. 'Sure, girl, we pay our way from now on, you see if we don't.'

It wasn't quite the way Teresa would have liked it done, but at least the wretched land would be back where it belonged, and although she knew it would give her uncle one more snipe in the age-old feud, it would be the last. It would also show Carl that the gesture had not been made in the hope of recapturing his affection. Uncle Patrick would make quite sure of this, she knew.

On the way back to the chalet, Teresa thought about what her uncle had said about Carl being away. Had he decided to make himself scarce in case she changed her mind and tried to contact him? On feeling the familiar prick behind her eyes she hastily turned her thoughts elsewhere, and prayed that the day would soon come when she could accept her unhappiness and be able to look back on it retrospectively, perhaps even be thankful that her uncle had prevented her marriage to Carl.

The landscape blurred in front of her tear-dimmed eyes. She wished she could believe that such a day would come, but she just couldn't see it.

She only knew that she loved Carl desperately. He was the only man for her. She didn't care about the feud, she only wanted Carl, and for things to be as they were.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE following Monday, Teresa started papering the sitting-room walls. She was not an expert paper-hanger, but she had had some experience in the past by helping her mother and at least knew enough to avoid getting a patterned paper, and had chosen a plain, almost lime green coloured paper.

The walls had been stripped the previous day, her uncle giving a helping hand in this, but as he stated in his inimitable way, 'Sure, I'll leave the rest to you, girl. I've a feeling 'twill be quicker in the long run. Them lines have gotta be straight, and my eyes aren't as sharp as they was.'

This was just what Teresa had hoped he would say. She was impatient to get on with the job, and would not have wanted to offend her uncle if he had decided to give a helping hand, in which case it would have meant working in the evenings when the working day was over. He could not afford to take time off, for, as Teresa had gathered from something he had said, there were plenty of people waiting on the sidelines to take over the work, and the competition was tough.

Having mixed the paste, Teresa pulled the dining table into the centre of the room and cleared it ready to lay out the strips of wallpaper.

Uncle Patrick had procured a stepladder for her use, the rungs of which were decidedly shaky, and

he had warned her to avoid the third step up as it was so worn that the chances were it would not hold even her slight weight. However, it was only a small ladder, and the height to be reached not a great one. In fact a chair would have sufficed, but her uncle's chairs, like the rest of the furniture, had seen better days, and on the whole Teresa was inclined to put more faith in the ladder than in the chair.

When she had done one wall, she stood back to look at her handiwork. With her head on one side her gaze slid critically down the joins, and she had to admit she had not made a bad job of it. It wasn't perfect, of course, but she hadn't expected it to be. Not, she thought, that she would have got away with it had it been a patterned paper. Not like that other time when she and her mother ... Teresa gulped, and hastily began on the next wall. It was work she wanted, not memories; but the memories came back and all Teresa's willpower could not stem them.

As she fixed the paper to the wall she was back in her old home helping her mother do the selfsame job. She remembered Rob walking in just as they were on the last lap, and heard again his exasperated shout of, 'Not that way! It's upside down! For goodness' sake look at the pattern I ' She remembered how they had all stood and gazed round the room, and then Rob had commented with a wide grin, 'You might as well carry on. I don't know how you've done it, but you've somehow managed to get every other one upside down. It's unusual anyway,' he'd added with a chuckle.

Teresa recalled how her mother had tried to look indignant but failed, and a few seconds later the

three of them had subsided into laughter, and Rob had had to finish the job for them, faithfully carrying on with their original theme.

The tears cascaded down her cheeks, and Teresa stood on the top step of the ladder, and rested her head against the wall while her grief washed over her.

Dimly through her stricken senses came the sound of her uncle's van pulling up outside the chalet. He always came to a grinding halt rather than a smooth stop. Her tear-swollen eyes tried to focus on her wristwatch to see the time; it wasn't quite mid-day, and that meant, she thought with a pang of dismay, that he had decided to pop in and see how she was getting on.

She didn't want to face him like this, for she had so far managed to keep her emotions well in hand. He wouldn't believe she had been grieving for her mother and brother, but would put her misery down to Carl and the broken engagement, and she didn't want to whip up any more hate in that direction, not now when they were so near the finish of the whole wretched affair.

The loft was directly above her, and she lifted up the heavy trapdoor and felt for the stout stick her uncle used to prop the latch up. Finding it, she pushed it into position and began hauling herself through the aperture. She could always say she was looking for something, for it served as a store for little-used items, and it would give her time to gain her composure before she faced him.

In her haste to remove herself from the vicinity she did not realise that her arm had caught the side

of the supporting stick, jerking it out of position and bringing the trapdoor crashing down on the top of her head.

All Teresa felt was a blinding pain, then total darkness.

When she opened her eyes she found it was evening. A small lamp had been placed on a table beside her bed, and her eyes travelled slowly round the unfamiliar surroundings. Her head ached, and she wished someone would come and tell her where she was.

Her wish was granted a few minutes later when the door opened and a small wiry-looking man, closely followed by a tall elderly-looking man, entered the room. The small man gave her an anxious look and walked to stand by her side. 'Well, girl, how do you feel?'

She considered this question for a moment or so, wondering why the man had said 'girl'. It was an odd way to address someone, she thought. Touching her head gingerly, she grimaced. 'I've a headache. Am I in hospital?' she queried, staring about her.

The taller of the two men then took over, and it was obvious that he was a doctor by the sure but swift examination he gave her.

A few minutes later she watched the two men move away from the bedside and hold a low conversation which she tried to listen to, but the throbbing in her head stopped her concentration.

The doctor came back to speak to her. 'Do you remember anything?' he asked gently.

She frowned, then finding that thinking hurt, lifted her hand in a weak gesture. 'No,' she said,

then slid her gaze back to the room. 'Where am I?' she asked again, and her voice rose slightly as she demanded, 'What happened to me?'

The small man was about to answer her when the doctor stopped him by answering smoothly, 'You've had a fall. No bones broken, but I'm taking the precaution of having you taken to hospital.' He smiled down at her. 'Don't worry, you're in good hands. You've got what is called temporary amnesia. The blow on the head would account for that. Now,' he said as he opened a case he produced from the floor, and took out a small box from which he took a small white tablet, 'I want you to have this now, and forget everything else. It will help that headache of yours.'

The doctor waited until she had taken the tablet, and by the time he had made the necessary arrangements to have her taken to hospital, she was well under sedation, and did not awake again until she was in the hospital.

Three days later Teresa was allowed to go home. At least, she thought, as she gazed round the chalet's sitting-room, while her uncle made her a cup of tea, they had told her it was her home.

The small wiry man, who she had later learned was her uncle, had told her how she had come to have the accident, and her gaze lingered on the lime green wallpaper. With a sense of wonderment she told herself that she had put that up, and thought that if she gazed long enough at it her memory would return. It was a little frightening not being able to remember anything.

She had even had to be told her name, and even though the doctor and nurses had impressed upon her the fact that she was not to worry about her loss of memory, and that in all probability she would regain it, it was easier said than done.

Teresa had also learned about her mother and brother and how she had lost them shortly before joining her uncle, and she felt guilty at not being able to remember anything about them. She must have loved them, mustn't she?

She met her uncle's worried look as he carried in the tea tray, not realising how much that completely blank lost look gave her thoughts away.

'Sure, there's nothing to worry about,' he assured her gently. 'Doc says you'll be fine in no time. And you've a fine job to go to.' He frowned. 'Not that I agree with the doc on that.' He ran a hand over his chin. 'But I guess he knows best, and said it would do you good to get out and take your mind off things. He doesn't want you moping around here all on your own.'

Teresa managed a wry smile. 'He's right, of course,' she said. 'Only I'm a bit worried about what I'm supposed to do.' Her brow wrinkled. 'You say I'm a secretary—what if I can't remember how to type?' she asked, feeling a rush of panic at the thought.

He poured her out a cup of tea and handed it to her solemnly. 'Now don't you go fretting about that. Jack Oates has been put in the picture, he won't rush you. For the first week or so you won't be expected to do much but learn the job.'

In spite of her uncle's assurances that all would

be well, Teresa found herself dreading starting work, and wished she had as much confidence in herself as her uncle, and apparently Mr Oates, had, for her new boss quickly put her at her ease by telling her to take her time in learning the job.

Michael Oates, his son, was never far from her side that first week, and Teresa was extremely grateful for his help in unravelling the mysteries of the auctioneering world. 'You'll soon get used to it, Teresa,' he had said, adding with his boyish grin, 'Even understand the bidding, you'll see!'

As to that last statement Teresa had her doubts, for on the Wednesday she joined Mr Oates and Michael at a cattle sale, and as she listened to the staccato tones of Mr Oates calling out the bids for each animal shown, her bewilderment increased. She would never understand what was being said, let alone understand the bidding. It appeared to be as clear as Chinese would be to her.

As each deal was concluded, Michael would enter the buyer's name in a book, and the price paid, and her bemused eyes would watch as each name was entered. She wondered how on earth Michael had managed to spot the eventual buyer, for before the man's name was given he had already written it down in the book.

Her thoughts were abundantly clear in her green eyes as she met Michael's amused brown ones, then as he grinned at her she would grin back, thinking how nice he was. Yet, she mused, she liked Michael very much indeed, and she studied him covertly under her lashes as he turned his attention to the prize bull now being offered for sale.

His dark, slightly curling hair was cut in the style of the day, but not too long. His features were clear-cut, and although he was not overly handsome, there was a look of boyishness there that would be bound to bring out the motherly instinct in every female. Teresa tried to pinpoint his age, but had to give it best. He could have been anything from twenty-five to thirty, and she wondered why he hadn't been snapped up on the marriage market.

After a few seconds' thought she was sure she had the answer; in spite of his outgoing nature, he was extremely shy where females were concerned, and she recalled an incident that had taken place a few days ago, when a rancher had come to the office to pay for some cattle he had bought, and was accompanied by his extremely pretty daughter, who had whiled away the time by making eyes at Michael during the transaction between her father and Mr Oates.

Teresa had had to smile to herself at the frankly inviting looks the girl threw his way, and could almost sense Michael's embarrassment. When they had gone, he had turned to Teresa who was pretending to be terribly busy, and remarked with a grin, 'Now there's a man-eater if I ever saw one. Women like that terrify me '

It was strange really, Teresa thought, he had never acted as though he were embarrassed or shy in her presence, in fact the reverse, she thought with an inward grin. If there was any mothering to be done—Michael was the one who was doing it I He would watch her like a hawk, and if she looked worried or confused, would hasten to reassure her.

She was so immersed in her thoughts that it took a little while for her to notice that the proceedings had come to a temporary halt. Wondering what the hold-up was, she looked across the cattle ring, aware of an indefinable air of expectancy around the buyers standing the other side of the ring, and saw a tall fair man approaching the inner rails of the ring. As her eyes followed his approach, she noted the way the other buyers automatically made a space for him beside the ring.

Seated a little behind Michael, Teresa was able to watch these proceedings without being seen herself, and had a good view of the buyers, for the idea was to get her accustomed to the various tactics adopted by the buyers during bidding—not that as yet she had much clue as to whether that large gentleman in the brown dungarees was bidding or actually blowing his nose!

It was, she thought, a subject she would have to take up with Michael later. Her eyes fell on the fair man again. What tactics would he adopt? she wondered, and decided to keep a close watch on him to see if she could spot his bargaining method.

That he was someone of importance, she was in no doubt. There was no casual wear here. His tan silk shirt and fawn slacks alone put him well apart from the other buyers, and she particularly noticed the way he had looked at Mr Oates, as if to say, 'Well, get on with it, man, I haven't all day!'

However, before Mr Oates started proceedings, he leaned down from his high perched stool and spoke to Teresa. 'Go and get some tea laid on, girl, we'll be finishing soon.'

Teresa obeyed without question; she was a little sorry she wouldn't be able to watch the fair man bidding, but there was always another time. As she let herself out of the side door, she heard the bidding begin.

The auction room offices were only across the road, and within a few minutes she had reached them and begun the tea preparations.

It was as well she had decided not to actually make the tea until their arrival, for it was almost an hour before they put in an appearance. Something must have held them up, she thought. No doubt Michael would tell her later. She had an awful lot to learn about auctioneering, but at least she liked the work, and considered herself very lucky to have not only an interesting job, but nice employers.

While she waited for them to come, Teresa typed a letter for Michael, confirming a hotel reservation for the following week's auction at a township further up north. As he had explained to Teresa, they sometimes obliged their clients by keeping a weather-eye out for certain breeds, and when they knew they were up for sale would make the necessary purchase for them.

As her fingers slid expertly over the keys, she felt once again that sense of wonder she had felt on finding she could still type.

Michael's explanation of this, to her, wondrous happening was, 'It's probably the same as learning to ride a bike, they say you never forget! '

But to Teresa it meant much more than just a wonderful discovery—it meant that she would eventually get her memory back, as indeed the doc-

for had assured her she would—in time, that was. Only Teresa was impatient to fill in that blank space of what went before. She wanted to remember her mother and brother, and still felt a sense of guilt that she couldn't.

She had told her uncle her feelings on this, and he would always repeat the doctor's words, that she would have to be patient and not push things. He had also said that it was probably nature's way of protecting her. She had suffered a great shock on the loss of her family, and also ... Here he had broken off sharply, and Teresa had a feeling that he had deliberately changed his mind about what he had been about to tell her, but concluded later that he had decided not to let her dwell on that sad time in her life. He had gone on to say how neglectful he had been in not keeping in closer touch with her mother. As a fund of information on their way of life he was useless, he had told her sadly.

Glancing out of the window, Teresa saw Mr Oates and Michael approaching, and hastened to switch on the kettle.

She was on the point of handing Mr Oates his tea when he turned his attention from the window and said, 'Teresa, I fancy one of Mrs Pott's fancy pastries. I expect you'd like one, too. Be a dear and pop across there, will you? Oh, and go the back way just in case some of those steers get loose—they'll be loading about now.' He grinned at her. 'It's been known to happen, you know.'

This was the first time such a request had been made, but even so it was a little near lunch time. Still, she did not mention that, and was very grateful

for the warning about the steers; she would be terrified if such a thing happened!

When *she* returned to the office a little while later, having had to queue for the pastries, which judging by the length of the queue must be very good, *she* forgot about Mr Oates' warning and automatically made her way to the front entrance of the offices. Before her fingers met the door handle the door swung open, and Teresa found herself face to face with the tall fair man she had seen at the auction.

'Teresa I ' he said sharply. 'What on earth are you doing here?'

Teresa stared at him—how did he know her name? Before she could answer him Mr Oates' voice spoke close behind the man. 'Come along in, girl. Did you have to wait until they baked them?'

She grinned at this, and with a half-curious look at the stranger still standing there watching her, she slipped past him and into the office, leaving Mr Oates with him.

She would have liked time to ponder on this strange happening, and the fact that the man had known her name. Her brow furrowed. Had she met him somewhere? in which case, he must think her awfully rude.

Her musings were cut short by a request from Mr Oates of, 'Come into my office, Teresa. I want to have a word with you.'

She glanced quickly at Michael—had she done anything wrong? she wondered. Michael's quick reassuring grin assured her that all was well, and she followed Mr Oates into his office.

'Er ... sit down, girl,' he said awkwardly as he closed the door behind her.

Teresa sat down slowly, sensing he was embarrassed about something, but what it was she had no idea.

'That man you met when you came in just now,' he said, then cleared his throat, proving to Teresa that he was embarrassed. 'That was Carl Elton,' he said slowly, and waited a second or so before he continued, giving Teresa the distinct impression that he rather expected the name to mean something to her.

Her lovely green eyes met his in silent query. 'Mr Elton,' she repeated steadily, then shook her head bewilderedly. The name meant nothing to her. She looked back at Mr Oates; it was clear that she ought to have known who the man was.

She sighed softly. Poor man, and she hadn't even answered when he spoke to her. It might help, she thought sadly, if she wore a card on her lapel stating that she had lost her memory, that way no one would be offended.

Giving Mr Oates a wry smile, she said gently, 'It's pretty obvious I ought to have known who he was. I do hope you apologised to him, Mr Oates, for my apparent rudeness.'

'I did,' he said carefully, 'explain how things were. You oughtn't to get any trouble in that direction from now on.'

Teresa did not like this answer, for it left a few unexplained, not to mention intriguing, questions in the air. Had she in fact had any trouble with this man? She conjured him up again in her mind's eye.

He was certainly not a man one could overlook in a crowd. He had that certain something about him. Authoritative, that was the word she wanted. He looked wealthy and could, *she* imagined, afford to indulge in any whim that took his fancy.

A thought then struck her. Had she been one of Carl Elton's 'whims'? She shook her head. She simply couldn't see how, for according to her uncle she had only been in the country a few weeks before the accident happened.

It was all very puzzling, and her brow furrowed as she attempted to pierce beyond that thick curtain that had so effectively screened her past.

'I shouldn't worry about it,' Mr Oates said hastily. 'What I wanted to tell you was that it would be better if you kept out of his *way*.'

Teresa's brows rose at this bald statement. There was no need to ask the question, it was in her eyes.

'Er—you're a very pretty girl, Teresa,' he said lamely, 'and Carl Elton and your uncle have never got on—never have, and never will.' At her indignant glance, he carried on hastily, 'Now you're a sensible girl, and there's no sense in starting things up again that are better left. I want you to promise me to make yourself scarce each time he comes here, and on no account be alone with him. If Michael and I aren't around when he calls, dodge out the back way—and if he phones, just hand the call over to either me or Michael.'

An extremely bewildered Teresa left his office a short while later to resume her work, but she found it impossible to keep her mind on the job. By all appearances, this Carl Elton had somehow made

contact with her; not only that, but must have shown signs of more than a passing interest in her, so much so that her uncle must have been worried about it.

It was also obvious that the man had a reputation as a lady-killer—which was odd, she mused. He didn't look the type, too haughty for one thing. Perhaps he led a Jekyll-and-Hyde existence? On this thought she grinned, and remembering Mr Oates' instructions to keep out of his way, her smile grew wider. Really, they were being rather over-protective, weren't they? As if she couldn't handle the situation. She'd met wolves before now, hadn't she?

Suddenly her brow furrowed. Now how did she know that?

CHAPTER FIVE

THE following day, Teresa met Carl Elton again. It was not a chance meeting, for he had come to the office to see her, but she didn't realise that at first. When the door opened and he strolled in she sat for a moment or so in indecision, for Mr Oates and Michael were out of town that morning and were not expected back until the afternoon.

She could, of course, have done precisely what Mr Oates had suggested she did, made some excuse and left the office, but it would have *been* the coward's way out, and was too ridiculous for words; besides, she was not unnaturally curious, and wanted to find out just what had taken place between herself and this man.

Her clear gaze met his as she said, 'I'm afraid Mr Oates is out, so is his son. They'll be back after lunch, though, if you'd care to come back.'

He stood gazing at her for a moment or so before he answered, and she saw his firm lips take on a sardonic twist as he said, 'There's no need to overdo the polite act. I got the message from Oates.'

His gaze left hers, and he stared down at a catalogue she had been copying out for the next auction. 'Are there any Herefords there?' he asked conversationally.

Teresa started; she was still trying to make out what he meant by 'the message'. Really, you'd think

he would show some sympathy instead of treating the matter as of no account! Well, one thing was clear, she told herself with relief, there couldn't have been much between them. Mr Oates must have been taking precautions against the possibility of Carl Elton's trying to flirt with her.

Feeling as if a great load had been lifted off her shoulders, *she* ran her eye down the list. 'Lot Seventeen,' she said brightly. 'Will you be able to bid, or shall I tell Mr Oates to put your bid in?' She looked up expectantly at him.

'Teresa?' he said softly, and the next moment had pulled her into his arms.

An extremely alarmed Teresa tore herself away from him. Mr Oates had not been all that far out after all, had he? she thought wildly as she headed for the back door, but Carl Elton was there before her, blocking her exit.

She backed slowly away from him, her eyes wide. She wished she could understand why she was so afraid, why she couldn't cut him down to size, for that was what one did with wolves, wasn't it? But it was no use telling herself these things when she couldn't carry them out. She only knew she had to keep her distance from this man, come what may. In a voice that trembled she heard herself say, 'If you don't leave this minute, I shall scream the place down! '

Her wary eyes saw his face whiten, and a muscle work at the side of his mouth. 'So that's it, is it?' he said harshly. 'You're determined to carry on with this loss of memory story, are you? Convenient, isn't it?' His voice changed to a mocking tone. 'Well, I

don't believe a word of it. You might have fooled the doctor, but you don't fool me. It gave you a perfectly valid excuse for cutting me dead, didn't it?'

He made a move towards her, and Teresa, terrified that he would make another attempt to take her in his arms, backed further away until she came up against her desk. She knew she wouldn't make the front door, he hadn't finished with her yet.

'Don't worry,' he said bitterly. 'I'm not risking the chance of another show of outraged innocence from you.' His eyes held hers in a hold she couldn't break, and *she* thought how very blue they were. She held on to the thought; anything to take her mind off what he was saying.

'You weren't the only aggrieved party, remember? You walked out on me. How the devil do you think I felt?'

When she didn't answer but continued to stare at him with wide eyes, he carried on, 'I've my pride, too, and you left me for him—someone you didn't even know existed until he claimed relationship with you.' His voice grew harsher. 'Now, that took a hell of a lot of forgiving. Okay, so I was shocked when I found out who you were; you should have allowed for that.'

Teresa heard, but couldn't understand any of it. She desperately wanted him to explain everything, only her head was aching. She put a shaky hand on her forehead. "Please I don't understand you," she whispered.

Instead of making him relent and ease the pressure he was putting on her, her words appeared to

infuriate Carl Elton even more. 'So he really got through to you, didn't he? Okay, play it that way for now if it makes you feel any better. But before I go I want you to know just where I've been these past few weeks, and why—then when you've thought things over I'm sure you'll regain that lost memory of yours.' His eyes narrowed. 'There's just one thing I want to make quite clear—what I said about your uncle still goes.'

He looked away from her and stared out of the window to the street beyond. 'I've been up north,' he said abruptly, 'taken an option on a ranch there. It's not quite so big as Sunset Ridge, but it has great potential.' His eyes came back to hers. 'What I'm telling you is that I want you to come with me.' Teresa saw his hand curl into a hard fist. 'No one there has ever heard of the name Rafferty—or the feud.'

Wordlessly she stared at him. He was asking her to go away with him. She knew a sense of shock, and her befuddled mind tried to make sense of what he had said about the name Rafferty. Her name was Cottam, so her uncle had told her—his name was Rafferty. She gave it up. Whatever the answer was, it didn't alter the fact that he had had the impudence to ask her to be his mistress!

Her face flushed as she acknowledged this, and her green eyes sparkled with indignation. 'I think I'd prefer to forget we had this conversation,' she said bitingly. 'And I can't think what made you presume I'd even be willing to consider your dubious proposal, but I can tell you here and now ...'

He did not allow her to finish, but cut in sharply

with, 'What the devil do you mean by "dubious proposal"?'

Teresa moved back against her desk. His eyes were blazing into hers, and she had a feeling she was treading on very thin ice and wished that Michael or his father were there.

When she did not answer, he nodded grimly at her. 'Still playing little girl lost, are you? Well, I'll give you one week to come to your senses. I thought I knew you, but it appears I've a lot to learn about you, as you have to learn about me. I don't play games, and the sooner you realise that the better.' He strolled to the door. 'It's up to you now.'

The door slammed behind him, leaving Teresa staring at the closed door. Her head ached with sharp intensity, and she held on to her desk for the support she so badly needed.

As time passed the headache receded, and she was able to sit down and make an attempt to come to terms with Carl Elton's extraordinary statements.

The thing that most worried her was the fact that he had been so sure of himself, and of her blind acceptance of his outrageous suggestion. For goodness' sake, what sort of a girl had she been? Even the most tenacious pursuer wouldn't have dared voice such an arrangement without encouragement, and she must have given him that encouragement—no wonder her uncle had been worried about the situation

She frowned. What had he said about her uncle? She shook her head; the words ran into one another, but it was something on the lines that he didn't want anything to do with him. She bit her lower lip;

had she been told not to tell him of their association?

Her frown deepened. But her uncle knew of it; Mr Oates had proved that by asking her to keep out of Carl Elton's way!

She pushed back a lock of hair from her forehead with a weary gesture. It was no use, whatever had happened now remained locked behind an impenetrable screen—but not for long, she told herself fiercely. It appeared her uncle Patrick had left a few gaps in his narration—gaps she was determined to have filled in, even if it meant confirmation of her earlier suspicions of the kind of girl she had been.

He had told her she was shocked after losing her family—had it so affected her that it had made her lose all sense of propriety? Was that why he had suddenly changed the conversation when he was trying to explain the reason why she had lost her memory? She had had the feeling then that he was holding something back, and now she knew what it was.

Bleakly she acknowledged the reason why he hadn't mentioned her association with Carl Elton. It was hardly a matter to bring up at such a time. No wonder he had put Mr Oates in the picture and asked for his co-operation in shielding her from any future contact in that direction!

The rest of the day passed too slowly for Teresa's liking. She was impatient to finish work and get back to the chalet and get the truth out of her uncle. Somehow she managed to contain herself until the evening meal had been eaten and cleared away, and

waited until her uncle had rolled his after-dinner cigarette and sat contentedly puffing at it, then threw the question at him.

'What happened between Carl Elton and myself?' she asked bluntly, noticing the start he gave at the name.

'Now who's been talking?' he demanded, assuming an indignant pose which told Teresa he was playing for time.

'No one,' she answered calmly. 'He came to see me today.' She met her uncle's wary eyes and held them. 'He asked me to go up north with him,' she added bluntly.

'Whist, girl! ' he began, 'the devil of a cheek, has he. 'Tis better forgotten, I tell you. Too proud to marry you now I Sure, didn't I tell you how it was before?'

'No,' said Teresa firmly, 'you didn't, and I want to know now—all of it, do you hear? And don't bother to spare my feelings. I rather gathered he was of the opinion that I would agree to his suggestion.' Her soft lips twisted as she added, 'I'd rather know, Uncle, no matter what happened, do you understand?' she added softly.

He gave a loud sigh and studied the end of his cigarette. 'Sure, girl, I'll tell you. Thought I was doing right in leaving things as they were. You'd had enough to put up with as it was, losing your folks like that.'

Gradually the story came out, and an amazed Teresa was told of the engagement party, and her uncle's appearance. It was a slightly biased account, she realised; for one thing, her uncle pointed out

with much emphasis that once the connection between her and the Raffertys had been established, Carl Elton had jilted her and she had left his home immediately after the party, and joined her uncle.

But, Teresa reasoned silently with herself, Carl Elton had told her she had walked out on him, and she found herself more inclined to believe his version of it rather than her uncle's. As she listened while he went over the past history of the feud, and why an alliance between the two families would never work, she was even more inclined to believe the other man.

The other man! Her spirits lifted at the thought that this other man had been no less than her fiancé. So she hadn't been playing fast and loose with him, hadn't been the sort of girl one puts dubious proposals to. Her brow furrowed. But Carl Elton had asked her to go away with him. Had her uncle at least been right when he'd said he was too proud to marry her now?

It was a point she had to concede. It did rather look that way; he had said nothing about marriage, yet he'd seemed so infuriated when she had refused him.

It was odd really, she mused, looking back on what appeared to be someone else's life. She could well see Carl Elton's point of view if she *had* walked out on him, and as he had said with such bitterness, with someone she hadn't known existed until he had shown himself that day.

She couldn't have loved Carl; it was the only answer. You didn't do that sort of thing to someone you loved. Somehow she must have realised it, and

taken the only way out by joining her uncle.

Teresa knew a great sadness. She ought not to have done that to him. No wonder he had been so bitter; under the circumstances he had every right to be. It also explained why he had accused her of pretending to lose her memory, for as he had said, it did give her a valid reason for forgetting his existence.

She sighed. Perhaps it was just as well she hadn't loved him, for she would have been greatly hurt by his assumption that she would have accepted the terms he had offered her, when marriage was out of the question.

As she lay waiting for sleep to come that night, Teresa's thoughts were anything but peaceful. She kept going over the amazing disclosures the evening had brought. She hadn't given her uncle any peace until she had heard the whole of it. How she had been brought to Australia by Carl Elton as his bride-to-be. How her uncle had learned by sheer chance who she was, and had claimed her as his niece.

Even allowing for his slightly biased account of the subsequent events, it did not alter the fact that the man she had walked out on had made no attempt to contact her until now. Although he had made a point of explaining that he had been away, she couldn't somehow see a man like that calmly accepting the situation.

Teresa bit her lower lip. She was forgetting the feud, wasn't she? and Carl Elton's pride. She nodded slowly to herself; he certainly had pride, it was in every fibre of his being, and it must have cost him a

lot to decide to forgive her, not only for walking out on him but for being a Rafferty!

He was a man used to having his own way, that much she knew, and it looked as if fate had dealt kindly with her by shielding her from whatever persuasive methods he would bring into force to gain her acquiescence.

Her thoughts roamed on, and suddenly a thought came that made her sit up sharply and eclipsed all else from her mind. Carl Elton had brought her from England! He must have known her mother and brother I She felt a surge of hope flow through her.

He would be the only one who could unlock the door to the past that had stubbornly remained closed against all her efforts to bring it to life again.

Oh, why hadn't she questioned him that day? If she had had her wits about her, she would have realised that he had known her before she had met her uncle. He'd told her so, hadn't he? and she had just stood staring at him.

Her brow furrowed. He had said something about giving her a week to make up her mind. Her soft lips twisted as she recalled what it was she was supposed to consider. Well, that was a lost cause for a start, she told herself grimly, but at least it meant she would be seeing him again, and this time she would be in full command of her senses, not only to answer questions but to ask a few herself I

CHAPTER SIX

THE following morning, Uncle Patrick lingered over his breakfast, and it occurred to Teresa that he had something on his mind.

It appeared that he had also done some thinking during the night, for after downing his second cup of coffee he said abruptly: 'You don't owe Elton anything, girl. Jist you remember that. I did as I said I'd do—gave back that land, like you wanted.' He stared at her under frowning brows. 'So you've paid your passage, like. As I said afore, that land's worth more than a dozen trips out, an' I ain't taken a penny piece for it, nor shall,' he added fiercely. 'From now on we pay our way.'

Teresa wondered whether he was trying to tell her that there was no need for her to see Carl Elton again, and was grateful for the fact that he didn't actually say so, for she would have hated to have gone against his wishes in- this, as she most certainly was going to see him again.

They were very busy that morning in the office, and although Teresa worked much as usual, she was very preoccupied with her thoughts. So much so that Michael, after watching her for a short while, asked, 'Everything okay, Teresa?'

At that precise moment Teresa had been thinking that a week could be a very long time, particularly when it concerned your future, or in her case her

past, and his question had to be thought about before she answered. She smiled brightly at him. 'Yes, thank you, Michael.'

However, he was not entirely convinced by this answer, and said solemnly, 'I think it's about time you had a change of routine. How about attending the local hop with me tomorrow?'

Teresa grinned at him; she would like that very much, she thought, and considering that Michael didn't care for social gatherings, she was well aware that he was making a concession in her case. 'Are you sure you want to go?' she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

He grinned back at her. 'I'm willing to risk it if you are.'

'Willing to risk what?' queried Mr Oates as he joined them.

'The local hop,' answered Michael. 'You know, Dad, where you used to go in your courting days.'

Teresa flushed and wondered how Mr Oates was going to take to the idea of his son courting her, which was what Michael had more or less implied.

Michael's father looked from his son's grinning countenance to Teresa's flushed one and raised his sandy-coloured brows, then grinned at them. 'In my day, it wasn't always certain we'd come out with the same young lady we went in with. You take good care of her, Mike,' he added, gravely now, to his son. 'There's a gang of shearers expected this week-end, and those boys can be rough.'

'On second thoughts,' murmured Michael, 'I'll take her out to Bathurst, and we'll do the thing in style—dinner and dance, how about that?' he asked Teresa.

Before she could answer Mr Oates said, 'Now that's a much better idea,' and turning to her said, 'You'll like that, Teresa.'

Having had her mind made up for her, all she had to do was nod her acceptance; there was no other course left open to her. Mr Oates then had no objection to Michael taking an interest in her, she thought as she watched him lumber back to his office.

Within a few minutes he was back again. 'Dang me!' he exclaimed with a rueful grin, 'I forgot what I came in for. I've got Bill Stokes on the line, Mike, he wants a word with you on pig prices. I told him you were up at Comba last week.'

Teresa watched the two men walk back to Mr Oates' office with mixed feelings. She wasn't sure whether to be pleased or worried over Michael's sudden declared interest in her. She didn't feel ready yet to enter into the romantic stakes again. There were too many loose ends left to tie up, and she wanted to be absolutely sure that she wouldn't repeat what must have been a narrow escape with Carl Elton.

The phone on her desk rang then, and she answered it 'I'll pick you up straight from work this evening,' was the brusque message, and before Teresa could answer there came the familiar buzzing that told her the caller had rung off.

She replaced the receiver with hands that trembled slightly. She was in no doubt as to who had called. It appeared she wasn't the only one who thought a week was too long. Carl Elton thought so too, apparently.

Her fingers were still a little unsteady as she

placed some paper in her typewriter. One part of her was relieved—the other apprehensive.

Teresa saw the car as soon as she left the office, and wished that Michael hadn't decided to walk a short way with her. She knew she ought to have said that she was meeting someone, and who that someone was, but Michael would have attempted to stop her, or failing that would have waited for Carl Elton to show up and had a few words with him, and this wouldn't exactly have started the meeting off on a friendly basis.

It would be much better, Teresa reasoned, if Michael was caught off his guard. Then with a little luck he would accept the situation.

It did not look at first as if her reasoning had proved correct, for as the sleek car drew up alongside them Michael, with a gesture that was typically protective, stood in front of Teresa as he turned to face Carl Elton, who had now pulled up and sat waiting for her.

'It's all right Michael,' she said placatingly. 'I want to talk to Mr Elton; please don't make a scene,' she added softly as her anxious eyes met his scowling ones.

Michael's eyebrows rose as he said gently, 'You're sure you know what you're doing, Teresa?'

With a slight flush, she nodded firmly. 'Yes,' she said, adding in a voice that left no room for doubt, 'I'll see you tomorrow, Michael,' and she walked towards the car.

There was no doubt that Carl Elton had taken full note of this little byplay between her and Michael, and his expression was grim as he got out of the car

and opened the passenger door for her, not even bothering to glance at Michael, who still stood there watching.

Firmly shutting the door on her, Carl Elton got back into the driving seat and after giving her a quick searching stare, drove off. Teresa had expected them to sit and talk in the car, and was a little surprised that he obviously had a destination in mind as the car purred slowly through the town, and out on to the main road.

'Where are we going?' she asked the grim-looking man by her side.

'Home,' he replied tersely.

Hers—or his? she wondered, and as they passed the turning off to the chalet she had the answer. His.

When the car eventually turned off the main road on to a side road that clearly proclaimed the boundaries of *Sunset Ridge* on a large signpost, Teresa gazed about her with interest, expecting to see the homestead round the next bend, and was surprised to find that they had only entered the outskirts of the property.

There were paddocks that seemed to stretch for miles on either side of them; some with cattle grazing in them,' and others empty.

A short while later, Carl stopped the car and stared out at the scene before them. Teresa looked too, and saw an area totally different from the well-kept paddocks they had passed.

With his eyes on the land, Carl said abruptly, 'Whose idea was it—yours or his?'

Teresa started and looked quickly at him, then her eyes went back to the land. Of course, that must

be Rafferty's Legacy! and her uncle had given it back to him, hadn't he?

'Well, mine, I think,' she replied uncertainly, and seeing the hard swift look he gave her, she went on, hoping to explain it to him. 'It seemed such a stupid waste, and hardly worth causing so much friction.'

Her answer did not please him, and the tension around them tightened rather than relaxed.

'Hardly worth causing so much friction?' he repeated in a soft, deadly voice. 'I could have put it better than that. I'll allow for the fact that you haven't much idea of the value of land in these parts—now, or as it was then. Taking that land was the same as taking the bread out of a man's mouth; it was his livelihood—and that,' he went on grimly, 'was only the start of things.'

Teresa sighed inwardly. Her uncle had been so right when he had said their marriage would never work. She shuddered to think of the consequences that would have followed had he kept away until after the wedding.

Carl waited a second or so for her comments, but as she said nothing he started the car up again and they continued the journey.

It seemed a long time to Teresa before they came to the homestead, and as her eyes roamed over the lovely old house surrounded by lawns and shrubbed areas bordering on yet more paddocks on which now grazed sleek horses, she couldn't help comparing the obvious wealth of the Eltons with her uncle's simple abode.

As the car swept up the well-cared-for drive to the house, she found herself actually ashamed for ask-

ing her uncle to give back that land. He had so little left, while this man had so much.

Suddenly she wanted to get it all over with, finished, so she could go back where she belonged. It might not be a mansion like the one she was now looking at, but it was the only home she had, and what was more, with someone who was actually related to her.

The car slid to a halt beside the imposing front door that had a wide verandah running the length of the front of the house, and with a feeling of trepidation, she watched Carl get out and walk round to her side of the car to open the door for her.

Teresa got out slowly. She not only felt lost, but utterly miserable. She had been a fool to come. Her uncle had been right again when he had advised her to let things be, even if he hadn't said so in as many words.

With a half-mocking bow, Carl gestured towards the front door. 'You know the way,' he drawled, then giving her an amused glance added, 'Or have you forgotten that too?'

Teresa looked at him and felt a spurt of annoyance. He was so sure of himself, wasn't he? and he still didn't believe she had lost her memory.

Her indignant eyes clashed with the amused blue ones, she shook her head. 'As a matter of fact I have,' she answered coldly.

His amusement vanished at her answer, and his lips thinned as he strode on ahead of her. 'Well, I'll have to refresh your memory, won't I?' he said grimly.

He led the way through the spacious hall whose

cool atmosphere denoted air-conditioning, and passing several rooms came to what Teresa assumed to be the sitting-room.

The luxuriously-furnished room, like the rest of the property, positively shouted money, and Teresa felt quite out of her depth as she followed Carl Elton into the room.

A tall girl unfolded herself from a deep chair and stood waiting for them. Teresa couldn't define the look she gave her as her dark blue eyes rested on her; probing, was as near as she could get to defining it.

As the girl stared so too did Teresa, and she saw the blue-black hair twisted back and worn high on the head and falling in a ponytail. She wore hip-clinging jeans and an open-necked white blouse, neither of which, Teresa knew, could be bought off the peg, for although her clothes were deceptively simple, they were also very costly. Polished knee-high riding boots completed the ensemble.

In her plain cotton dress that could be picked up in any number of stores, and her open-toed sandals, Teresa felt even more out of place. Whoever this girl was, she belonged in this kind of setting; not only her clothes said so, but her lovely, if haughty, expression.

'Isobel! 'Why are you here?' Carl's voice held a touch of impatience in it. 'I thought you had company at home.'

'So we have, darling,' the girl murmured throatily. 'I only popped in to ask if we might borrow a few mounts for our guests.'

His reply was curt. 'Of course! Since when has it been necessary to ask?'

With an offhand shrug the girl's eyes returned to Teresa, and rested on her hair. 'No wonder you did something about it, darling,' she said, a little spitefully to Teresa's sensitive ears. 'I couldn't think why you looked so different.'

Teresa felt a small spurt of surprise. The woman had obviously met her before, and was now commenting on her hair. Well, at least Teresa could understand the comment; she had noticed herself that she had used something to darken her hair. Whatever the reason had been, she had not bothered to shade it again, and she was now as nature had intended her to be, a redhead with a vengeance.

At the time of her discovery Teresa had been a little amused at the silent quip, but now felt at a distinct disadvantage. The man and the girl knew more about her than she did, and she stood there feeling completely at a loss as to what to say, knowing that whatever she said would sound stupid.

She was saved from this embarrassment by a very pointed look from Carl to the girl, who after giving another shrug, said hastily, 'Okay, I'm on my way,' and made for the door, gave a careless, 'See you,' when she reached it, and was gone.

Now that she was alone with Carl Teresa found herself wishing she could have followed the girl out of the morn, and felt rather than saw the impatient look he gave her as he said abruptly, 'Sit down, Teresa. We've a lot to talk about.'

Feeling apprehensive, she did as she was told: there was no point now in evading the issue, but how she wished it was all over with. Her unhappy eyes watched as Carl walked over to a cabinet and took out several bottles, then proceeded to mix some

drinks and handed her a glass of some concoction.

Teresa, accepting it, stared at it for a few minutes. He hadn't asked her what she would like, just got it for her.

His eyes met her puzzled ones, and he smiled grimly. 'My memory still holds good, if yours doesn't,' he commented harshly. 'And now,' he said, still in that grating voice as he seated himself opposite her, 'let's have the gloves off, shall we? This loss of memory act just isn't going to work. I told you I don't play games, and my patience is running out fast—so let's have the truth, shall we? You've heard the old man's story, so now you'll hear mine.'

Teresa's wary eyes watched him settle back in his chair, noticing that he did not once take his eyes off her. 'Relax,' he said softly, 'we've plenty of time. Dinner won't be served until seven-thirty.'

She started. Why, that was in two hours' time! 'I can't possibly stay to dinner,' she said quickly. 'I've my uncle's meal to get.'

For a frantic second it looked as if Carl would haul her out of her chair and shake her hard; at least that was the impression she got, but then she saw his clenched fists relax as he took himself in hand, and straightened his fingers out along the arm of the chair. 'So he's made you his skivvy, has he?' he said quietly, yet there was an undercurrent of fury in his voice that warned her of his mood. 'He can get his own meal tonight. He's done it before, and he can do it again.'

There was such an air of finality in this statement that in spite of her trepidation Teresa was angry. What an autocratic man he was 1 She very much

doubted if *he* had ever had to get his own meal. Oh, no, there would be an army of servants to wait on him. 'I'm sorry,' she said with just as much determination in her voice as he had had in his, 'I'm afraid I won't be staying for a meal. For one thing,' she carried on firmly, not failing to note the glint in his eyes, 'my uncle doesn't know where I am—and for another, I don't see why he should get his own meal. He'll be tired when he comes in.'

That did it! The next instant she found herself pulled out of her chair and held in an unbreakable hold. Whatever restraint Carl had put upon himself was now gone, and he was a very purposeful man. 'By heaven,' he said through clenched teeth, 'I've had enough of this! I've tried to get through to you, but you're determined to get back at me, aren't you? It's one way of telling me there's to be no second chance, is that it? Wipe the slate clean and forget me? Well, I'm not going to let you do it, do you hear? So I took a hell of a knock when I found out who you were, I'm not denying it. I was punch-drunk for the rest of that day, and I don't recall much of what happened the following day either,' he added grimly, 'but I'm good and sober now. One thing alone stood out way above matters of pride and years of bitterness between the Eltons and the Raffertys, and that was you and me. The Raffertys aren't taking you from me.'

His gaze centred on her lips, and knowing what was coming, she tried to twist her face away from him, but he caught the back of her hair and forced her to accept his kiss, saying as his lips met hers,

'You can fight me for the rest of eternity. I'm not going to let you go.'

A stunned Teresa felt his lips on hers; gentle at first, then with a growing passion, and she tried to understand what was happening to her. She didn't feel distaste or disgust at the feel of his lips on hers, but she felt she should have done, and that brought her a great sadness. This man loved her, of that she was in no doubt. He was telling her so with his lips, and she couldn't respond, and it was no use pretending she could.

He held her away from him, and looked into her eyes. There was something about the lost, blank look in her lovely eyes that made him catch his breath sharply and jerk her to him again, holding her suffocatingly close to him. 'Oh, no ' he groaned. 'So it's true, then?' he whispered against her hair. 'You don't know me, do you?'

Teresa moved her head in dumb confirmation, and attempted to pull herself out of his arms. This time he let her go and gently settled her back in her chair again, then stood looking down at her.

'I'm sorry,' she whispered, 'so terribly sorry. I don't remember anything.' Her gaze left her hands that were locked together, and she stared up at him with pleading eyes. 'I only know what my uncle told me—I even had to be told my name.' She hesitated. 'I know you met me in England, and brought me out here.' She hesitated again; it wouldn't be wise to say 'to marry me', not now, she thought miserably. 'I know I lost my mother and brother before I left,' she swallowed. 'I can't remember them either—my uncle couldn't tell me anything about that part of my life.'

She looked quickly away from those searching eyes of his, and down to her hands again. She didn't want to tell him that that had been the only reason she had wanted to see him—to try and find out about her family, for he must have met them. But the urge to know compelled her to ask the question. 'Did you meet my people?' she asked quickly before her conscience stopped her.

To her, disappointment Carl did not answer her question, but posed one of his own. It was clear that his mind was on other matters. 'What happened?' he asked quietly.

It took a second for Teresa to understand the question, and although she was disappointed that he had disregarded hers, conceded that he had a right to know. 'I fell,' she said slowly, wrinkling her forehead in an effort of memory. 'I was doing some wall-papering, my uncle said, and I hit my head somehow as I fell.'

She looked up at him expectantly. Perhaps now he would answer her question? Again she was disappointed, for his expression had hardened, and she saw he was too incensed by her answer to give her satisfaction.

'Wallpapering!' he exclaimed in disgust, and Teresa saw his hands clench into fists again. 'And that old fool let you do it!'

She lifted her brows at this bald statement. 'I must have wanted to do it,' she said mildly.

Carl's gaze left her, and centred on the window. 'If only I'd stopped you from leaving that day,' he said bitterly, 'none of this would have happened.' He looked back at her. 'I oughtn't to have let that old devil get under my skin.'

Teresa was coming out of the sad state fast. 'If you're referring to Uncle Patrick,' she said indignantly, 'from what I've heard, he didn't have any option in the matter!'

His blue eyes probed hers, then he gave a half-weary smile. 'Seems he convinced you, at any rate,' he answered.

It was Teresa who looked away first; she felt awkward and longed for the end of this rather embarrassing interview.

'I love you, Teresa,' he said softly, 'never lose sight of that.' There was a wealth of sincerity in his words that made her look back at him swiftly. 'I'm not going to try and whitewash my reactions that day, but I do want you to try and understand how it was.'

Carl walked towards her, and sat on the arm of her chair, catching hold of one of her hands. 'You've no doubt heard about the feud—how it started; and how it went on year after year. I'm not excusing my family's part in it, any more than the Raffertys', but there've been times in the past when we would willingly have called a halt to the whole wretched business.' He frowned and studied her small hand that still lay in his. Teresa would have liked to have pulled it away, but felt powerless to do so.

'Unfortunately,' he went on, 'as you've probably heard from your uncle, the Raffertys' fortunes went from bad to worse, and we got blamed for what almost certainly was bad management on their side. Instead of pulling themselves together, they were content to snipe away at old grievances.' His free arm swept in an arc, encompassing the room

and its rich furnishings. 'As you see,' he said sardonically, 'they didn't impede our progress.'

He was silent for a moment or so, then his hand clenched once more into a fist. 'What they did do was to start a smear campaign that damn near came off, only not quite. It split the town; half on the Raffertys' side, and half on ours.' He gave a sigh. 'I guess human nature has a lot to do with it—the underdog will always find a champion.' His voice grew harder. 'But we've worked for what we've got, and we didn't climb on the backs of the Raffertys to achieve success.'

Teresa wondered if he had forgotten that she was a Rafferty too, and she attempted to remove her hand, but he kept a firm hold on it.

'It's over and done with, Teresa,' he said slowly. 'I meant what I said about not letting the past stand in our way.' His eyes travelled slowly over her face. 'I know you don't remember the past—not at the moment, anyhow—but you've got to trust me, and know that what I'm telling you is the truth. You loved me as much as I loved you.' He gave a twisted grin. 'Well,' he amended, 'I don't think it's possible for you to care for me as much as I care for you—and I can prove that to you,' he said softly.

His glance once again encompassed the room and then travelled towards the window and out beyond to the rich pastures in the distance. 'This land has been in my family's possession for over a decade, and I love every inch of it—but for your sake, I'm prepared to turn my back on it and start anew. It won't be an easy break for me; the place I eventually settled on is no comparison to Sunset Ridge, I

couldn't have hoped to find one that was.' His firm lips clamped together on this thought, then he shrugged half-wearily, 'But I'll do it for your sake. I couldn't lose you. Are you beginning to understand now?' he said gently.

Teresa's lovely eyes met his and she nodded slowly, if still a little warily, but Carl appeared satisfied. He stood up and pulled her to her feet, and would have taken her in his arms had she not forestalled the movement by slipping past him and walking to the window, where she stood gazing out.

She felt helpless, and knew she had to be very careful not to commit herself to his persuasive methods. She had walked out on him, hadn't she? and she must have had a good reason for doing so. She sighed inwardly; it appeared she hadn't loved him as much as he had thought she had.

'I didn't cancel the wedding, Teresa,' he said abruptly, now close behind her.

She turned towards him, the surprise in her eyes clearly evident.

'It's in ten days,' he added significantly.

Ten days! Teresa's brain whirled; she couldn't possibly marry him—he ought to realise that now. She swallowed. 'I'm sorry,' she said quietly, 'but you must see I couldn't possibly ...' She couldn't go on. He must know what she meant.

His autocratic features hardened as he said harshly, 'You didn't believe me, then?'

Teresa shook her head vehemently. 'How could I either believe or not believe?' she said bewilderedly. Her eyes met his. 'I only know I walked out on you,' she said, adding in a low voice, 'That's all I know, and it doesn't look as if I really loved you, does it?'

she asked gently, hoping that this time he would understand what she was trying to tell him.

Carl moved closer to her, but did not touch her. 'I can answer that one,' he said bitterly. 'Not that it's to my credit, and in a way I gave you no option but to do just that.' His voice now held a touch of weariness as well as bitterness in it. 'If your uncle Patrick had chosen a less flamboyant way of introducing himself, chances were that I would have accepted the situation.'

He moved yet closer to Teresa and she could almost feel his arms around her, but he still did not touch her. 'Think, Teresa,' he said softly, 'we were celebrating our engagement, and I doubt if there were two people in the whole world as happy as we were.' He was silent for a second or two as if marshalling his thoughts, then went on in a low tone, 'It was a full house, as the saying goes. There were a hundred and fifty guests in this house—all friends of mine and all fully aware of that damned feud. I'd grown up with most of them—and in walks your uncle, and calmly announces that you're a Rafferty I. No asking to *see* me in private—oh, no he must let the whole world know who you are. If he'd done it any other way, I might have been able to keep the lid down on that particular disclosure. It wouldn't have mattered a damn if it had come out after we'd married. You would by then have been an Elton, and woe betide anyone who said different.'

Teresa heard, but it didn't help her one bit; it only served to reinforce her earlier argument. She had chosen to stand by her uncle—a relative, yes, but someone she hadn't known.

As if sensing her thoughts, Carl said, 'Yes, you're

right. Why did you choose to go with him? I think I can tell you that, too.' His arm slid round her waist, making her stiffen at the contact, but he did not remove his arm although he could not have been unaware of her reaction.

was still reeling from your uncle's bombshell—oh, yes,' he asserted grimly, meeting her startled eyes, 'he meant it to be just that. I must say he thoroughly enjoyed the shock he gave me.' He shrugged, as if to throw off the memory, and continued, 'When I took you somewhere where we could talk in private, I had some crazy idea that you were in on the whole thing,' he smiled wryly at her. The Raffertys get you thinking that way, I'm afraid. You weren't, of course,' he added quickly, 'but I was hardly in a position to think straight at that particular time. I'm afraid you caught the overflow.'

His arm tightened around her waist. 'I don't remember now exactly what I did say to you—something on the lines of wanting confirmation that he was your uncle.' His voice softened, 'Forgive me, my love. You needed as much reassurance at that time as I did, only I was too full of myself to see it. I don't blame you for walking out on me. I deserved it.'

Even knowing why she had walked out on him, Teresa was still of the opinion that she would not have done such a thing if she had loved him. Surely she would have understood why he had acted as he had? If you loved someone you stood by them, didn't you? So her original thoughts had been correct; she had jumped at the chance of freedom. She felt that touch of sadness again that she couldn't give him the response he wanted.

'I wish ...' she began hesitantly, then started again, this time on a firmer note. 'I can't pretend to remember,' she said as she passed a hand over her forehead where she could feel the throbbing ache beginning to start up again. 'I can only say I'm very sorry—about everything.' Her lovely eyes met his with a pleading look. 'Can't you see it's better forgotten? Even I can see that the marriage wouldn't have worked. How could it, with so much bitterness behind it?'

Carl gave her an intense look that said more than words. He needn't have spoken, for his thoughts were there in his eyes. 'I'm not giving up, Teresa,' he said implacably. 'If I have to wait years for you, then I'll do just that. Sooner or later your memory is going to come back, and I'll be around to pick up where we left off. Is Turnbull treating you?' he asked tersely.

Teresa, busy sorting out the implication of his words, started. He meant Dr Turnbull, of course. She nodded wordlessly.

'I'll have a word with him,' Carl said abruptly. 'If I don't get any satisfaction, I'll call in a specialist. Turnbull's good, but a bit out of touch with up-to-date methods.'

Teresa stared at him; there was no doubt that he meant every word, and she felt a wave of panic flow through her. He simply refused to take no for an answer. Nor was he prepared to let nature run its course, as Dr Turnbull had intimated would be the best way to handle the situation. But not Carl Elton! she thought angrily. He was so used to getting his own way. It did occur to her that that might have

been the reason why she had walked out on him; it was beginning to look as if she had had a narrow escape! 'I think my uncle might have something to say about that,' she said coldly, hoping to show him he wasn't going to have things all his own way, but she need not have bothered.

'It might suit him to keep things as they are,' he answered grimly, then meeting her indignant eyes, he added softly, 'And you? Don't you want to know the past, or remember your family?'

Teresa swallowed quickly, acknowledging his skilful thrust into her frail armour. Of course she wanted to remember—her family more than anything. She had to concede that Carl had chosen his weapons well. Only he held the key, and she had a feeling that he was now waiting for her to ask all the questions she had wanted to have answered earlier, only she knew he would only grant her so much at a time. Subtle blackmail, in fact! On such conditions she did want to get her memory back.

'Of course,' she answered swiftly, and added bitterly, 'According to Dr Turnbull, losing one's memory sometimes acts as a release from stress. Nature's way of easing grief,' she added for good measure, but as she saw him wince visibly at her words, she wished she had held her tongue. She had to remember why he was acting as he did. He had a lot at stake, and this time it wasn't pride but love that spurred him on; love, she thought disconsolately, that could never be returned.

She looked hastily away, feeling ashamed of herself, and said in a low tone, 'I'll ask Dr Turnbull if he has any other suggestions.'

'We will ask Turnbull,' he replied firmly.

The subject was then closed, and to Teresa's surprise and relief, Carl did not press her to stay and have dinner with him, but remarked lightly that as she appeared to have a conscience about getting her uncle's meal, he had better take her back to the chalet.

It was only a small concession on his part, but she was grateful for it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN the car drew up outside the chalet, Teresa saw that Uncle Patrick must have been on the watch for them, for he was standing by the front door, his slight figure stiff and erect, and it occurred to her that Michael might have told him of her encounter with Carl.

As she opened the front gate Carl was beside her, and she had a sinking feeling in her stomach when she realised he had every intention of stating his views to her uncle.

'There's no need for you to come any nearer,' her uncle growled to Carl, 'and I'll thank you to keep your distance from Teresa in future. Sure, haven't you brought the poor girl enough trouble?' He turned to Teresa. 'You jist run in and get yerself a cup of tea.'

Carl's hand caught hers, and he pulled her back close to him before she could comply with this direction. Although it was cowardly, she would have liked to have done just that, but she knew it wouldn't answer; she owed both men too much to take the easy way out.

'Mr .' she began, then hastily corrected herself; she couldn't say 'Mr Elton', it would, under the circumstances, sound extremely odd, yet that was how she thought of him. She started again. 'Carl has been extremely understanding, Uncle,' she said

firmly, 'and I don't see why we have to stand out here and wrangle—surely we can talk in a civilised manner inside the house?'

Her uncle frowned at this, but had no choice but to do as she requested, and with the gesture of a jerked thumb in the direction of the chalet at Carl, he muttered, 'It's up to you, girl. Jist as long as you know what's what.'

Once inside the chalet and in her uncle's shabby sitting-room, Teresa took full note of her ex-fiancé's haughty appraisal of the poorly furnished room, and it aligned her to her uncle's cause with far more determination than any words might have done, particularly when she thought of the luxurious trappings of Sunset Ridge.

'Well?' began her uncle belligerently, as if sensing what Teresa had sensed. 'Take a good look, Mr Elton. We've no fancy trimmings here, but we pay our way. Say what you've a mind to say, and be on your way.'

Carl's hard gaze left him, and softened as it rested on Teresa. 'I want Teresa to see a specialist,' he announced calmly. 'Doctor Turnbull's okay on mundane jobs, but he's no specialist in this field.'

Patrick Rafferty drew himself up stiffly and stared at Carl with fixed intensity. He couldn't, thought Teresa, have looked any more infuriated had his own integrity been called into question. 'Oh, you do, do you?' he fumed. 'And what, might I ask, is it to you? She's in my charge now, and if I say Doctor Turnbull is good enough, then he's good enough. We don't want any fancy doctors turning her inside out. She's okay. You leave her be!'

'I'm sure it suits your book to leave things just as they are,' Carl answered through set lips, 'with a lost memory she can see your point of view, can't she? Well, I'm afraid I don't intend to "leave her be", as you put it. She'll have the best treatment that money can buy, and I'm giving you fair warning, Rafferty, I'll brook no interference—try me and see.'

'So it's threats now, is it?' blazed Uncle Patrick. 'See, girl, what did I tell you? He's not content with throwing you out when he thought he couldn't stomach a Rafferty living at Sunset Ridge. Now it seems he's had second thoughts about it—well, it's too late, Mister Elton,' and turning to Teresa, who was beginning to feel a king-size headache coming on, he said, 'How about it, girl? Weeks it took him to fight off the repugnance that you was a Rafferty; now he wants to take up where you left off.'

Teresa saw Carl's hand clench into fists and knew he was having trouble keeping his distance from her uncle. It wasn't a fair fight, for her uncle was baiting him, and hitting where it hurt most. But she had to admit ruefully that it was all he had to fight with.

'For goodness' sake!' she said wearily. 'Can't we have a sensible discussion without old scores being brought into the conversation?' She gave her uncle a warning look. 'Carl has been away up north, Uncle, and I'm fully aware of the reason why he took that trip, so don't let us get sidetracked on that issue, please!' She looked at Carl. 'And to be honest, Carl, I'm afraid I do agree with my uncle. I don't really think it's necessary to have another doctor. I like Doctor Turnbull, and **I'm sure that all that can be done is being done.**'

Carl's set lips told her he hadn't liked that one bit, and her uncle's malicious snort of triumph must have tried his patience sorely. He gazed at her for a moment or so, then said harshly, 'Very well, if that's how you feel. You'll have no objection, I hope, to my having a word with him on the subject?'

Teresa shook her head a little bewilderedly. She couldn't see the point of it, but if he wanted to do so she saw no reason why he shouldn't.

Her uncle, however, had every reason, and promptly said so. 'What's it to you?' he asked bluntly. 'She ain't having no change of heart, if that's what you're counting on. She'll make the same decision she made before,' he added smugly, making no attempt to hide his satisfaction in rubbing salt in the wound, and Teresa could have slapped him as one slaps a naughty child.

Here it was again, she thought wearily; without realising it, her uncle had confirmed the fact that Carl had not thrown her out, as he had so spitefully stated a few moments ago. So her earlier suspicions had been right. She had chosen to live with her uncle rather than marry Carl, and no matter how conscience-stricken her uncle was unknowingly making her feel, it helped strengthen her resolve.

She rounded on her uncle, who soon lost his air of triumph as her scolding words made their point. 'That was an extremely uncalled-for remark, Uncle, and I've a mind to make you apologise for it. However, I'll forgive you only if you keep the conversation on more reasonable lines. It's very good of Carl to bother about me at all, considering,' she underlined the words, 'that I walked out on him.'

'Had no choice,' muttered her uncle, thoroughly

unrepentantly, but after catching her eyes and seeing the warning they conveyed, he shrugged to show his disapproval of the way things were going and added, 'I guess it ain't no use saying no. It's a free country, after all, if that's what he's a mind to do. I'm jist saying it's better forgot, that's all,' he concluded darkly.

Carl's fair autocratic head inclined at this rather belated climb-down on Patrick Rafferty's part, and having got what he came for, he strode to the door, and held his hand out to Teresa as he reached it. 'Teresa?' he said softly.

Teresa felt torn between the two men, but she was drawn by some compulsion she did not understand to Carl's side. Nodding mutely, she joined him, but did not take his hand as they walked to the front door.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' Carl said firmly, as he opened the door to let himself out. 'I'll pick you up from the office. You finish at twelve, don't you?'

She felt a rush of panic; he didn't intend to give her time to review the situation. If she didn't watch out she could still find herself being swept down the aisle to marry a man she didn't love, or even know. 'Oh, not tomorrow,' she said hastily, 'I've already made plans for tomorrow.' In a sense this was true, for it was Saturday, and Michael was taking her to the dinner-dance at Bathurst.

She felt her wrist caught, and winced as Carl's strong fingers bit into her flesh. 'Michael Oates, I suppose?' he said harshly. 'I might have guessed! He hasn't wasted much time, has he? Egged on, no doubt, by your uncle.'

Teresa gasped indignantly, 'This will be the first time he's taken me out, and it's not like that at all ! ' she added crossly.

'It had better not be! replied Carl savagely. 'I think I'll have a word with Master Oates,' he added darkly.

'Don't you dare !' flashed Teresa, no longer feeling sorry for Carl. Of all the pompous, overbearing males, he took the cake! 'Michael's been very good to me. And,' she added for good measure, 'as my uncle said just now, what right have you to dictate what I should do and shouldn't do?'

She found herself caught in a tight embrace, and being kissed in no uncertain manner. When she was weak and gasping he let her go, and stood studying her through narrowed eyes. 'That's my right,' he said softly, 'and you're not going to be allowed to forget it. Okay, so tomorrow's out, but don't make any plans for Sunday evening. I'll pick you up at seven.'

Teresa watched him walk to the gate, and her smouldering eyes met his implacable ones as he turned to give her a mocking half-salute before getting into his car and driving off.

Well, she hadn't said, yes, had she? she fumed as she made her way back to the sitting-room. If Michael had plans for Sunday, she would very probably fall in with them! She simply refused to be bullied by Carl Elton, and how she could have ever agreed to marry him in the first place was beyond her understanding.

Her uncle gave her a searching look as she settled down in one of the old armchairs, and fixed brood-

ing eyes on the single bar of the electric fire he had switched on, for the evenings were beginning to get chilly now.

'You're not going soft over him again, are you, girl?' he asked warily.

Teresa's eyebrows rose, and she cast him a look of reproach. 'Of course not,' she replied with a note of surprise in her voice. Then she looked back, frowning, at the glow of the fire. 'What puzzles me is how we ever got together in the first place.' She sighed. 'Of course I don't really know what happened, but I'm sure I couldn't have been myself. He's so overbearing, isn't he? So used to giving orders and expecting everyone to jump to it. I suppose,' she mused, 'that's what comes with having so much money.'

'Sure, that's about the sum of it,' agreed her uncle enthusiastically, and warming to his theme, he added, 'And sure you weren't yourself, girl. Didn't he come across you when you'd just lost your folks? Sure, he caught you on the rebound, that's for certain.' He chuckled, 'He's come a cropper this time, hasn't he?' He shook his head in mock sorrow. 'I never thought I'd find it in my heart to feel sorry for an Elton, but I guess there's a first time for everything. He's over the moon about you, that's for sure, and he ain't the type of man to take kindly to a rebuff. No, sir, this time the tables are turned with a vengeance

Teresa sighed inwardly; he was referring to the feud again. It seemed he couldn't forget it, not even now when it should have been all over with. She recalled what Carl had told her about the Eltons

wanting to end it, but that the Raffertys had decreed otherwise. She looked at her uncle, who was now lost in thought. Perhaps if he'd married and had a family, instead of choosing a solitary existence and brooding on the past, things might have been different. Although, she mused, some folk thrived on past grievances, they were a kind of a lifeline to them, and if the truth was known, they actually enjoyed the verbal skirmishes the situation provoked. That her uncle belonged to this particular species, Teresa was in no doubt. It didn't make him a wicked man, just a provoking one.

'Course,' her uncle muttered, coming out of his reverie, 'you wouldn't know that part of it. I doubt your mam would have said much about that.'

Teresa felt a cloud of depression settling over her. She was now about to hear more about the wretched feud, and she really felt she had had enough for one day, it was only the mention of her mother that stopped her from actually saying so. Whatever Uncle Patrick was about to tell her obviously concerned her mother, and that Teresa did want to hear.

Her uncle coughed, as if embarrassed, and gave her a wry grin. 'Keep forgetting, girl, you don't remember anything, do you? Don't mind me, I'm an old fuddy-duddy, and my memory ain't what it was. Come to think of it, I did tell yer about your mam—she was sweet on an Elton, see, and got pushed into a job that took her to England. That's what I meant when I said it was different this time. It's a Rafferty now that's calling the tune—yes, sir!'

Teresa's interest faded quickly, for her uncle was back in the past again, and she was hungry for news

of more recent events. News that only Carl Elton could give her, if he so wished.

Her uncle broke into her reverie with an abrupt, 'Are you seeing him again?'

She looked across at him and wondered if he had guessed the trend of her thoughts. 'Yes,' she said quietly. 'I must.'

'No must about it,' replied her uncle belligerently. 'You ain't going to let him browbeat you again, are you?'

Teresa sighed wearily. 'I thought I'd made that quite clear,' she said slowly. 'I have no feelings whatsoever about him, but he's the only one who knew my family, and for that reason alone I must keep in contact with him.' She looked away at her hands, clenched tightly in her lap. 'In a way I'm using him, and I've not much taste for it.' She met her uncle's surprised eyes, and smiled sadly at him. 'That ought to please you,' she said quietly.

He had the grace to look a little shamefaced at this, but soon came back with, 'Well, you jist watch your step, my girl, that's all. He's not a man to play fast and loose with. I'll grant him that, if nothing else.'

The following morning Teresa was due to see Dr Turnbull again, and as she sat in the small waiting-room, waiting to go in and see him, she wondered whether Carl had carried out his threat; for that was how Teresa had looked upon his suggestion of her seeing a specialist.

Seated a little while later opposite the cheery-looking, tubby doctor, she reaffirmed her thoughts

about her confidence in him. His easy-going and slightly vague manner camouflaged a sharp brain, and an intensely humane man.

She really hadn't much to report, but she could tell him of her delight when she found she had not forgotten how to type. 'Only a small thing, really,' she said slowly, 'but it was a start, wasn't it?'

Doctor Turnbull smiled back at her, seeming pleased. 'As you say, it's a start,' he remarked. 'You'll probably get several nice little surprises like that, and then everything will gradually fall into place.'

'What about the headaches I seem to get when I try to think about the past?' she asked quietly.

He frowned thoughtfully. 'All part and parcel of what's happened,' he explained. 'You see, Teresa, the brain's a very complex instrument, and emotions play the devil with it. This headache is caused by your rejection of the memories that are trying to come back.' He held up a hand at her startled look at this disclosure, and went on before she could protest that she wasn't consciously suppressing the past. 'Without realising it,' he said gently, 'things build up. Grief takes its toll. You'd have done far better to give way to it, you know. As it was, you stifled it.' He gave her a considering look. 'For a girl who had just lost her family, and then her fiancé, you took it all a little too calmly. I have it from your uncle that he never saw you cry.'

Teresa's eyes left the doctor's kindly ones, and she looked down at the desk in front of her. So he knew the whole of it; of course he would have to, wouldn't he? she told herself dully.

'It's a very small town,' he went on, still in that

gentle voice that told her that he knew what she was thinking. 'I brought a fair number of the folk in this town into the world, and there's not much I don't get to know about, some time or other.'

Her gaze centred on her fingers clenched tightly together in her lap. 'Of course,' she murmured in a low voice.

Now don't worry about it,' soothed the doctor. 'We'll let old mother nature take care of things. Only when you're good and ready will the puzzle fall into place. There's just one thing, though,' he added, his eyes studying the blotting pad on his desk. 'I want you to think very carefully before you commit yourself in any way—leave things as they are until you're back to normal again,' he advised her solemnly.

His pale blue eyes met Teresa's startled ones, and she was in no doubt as to what he meant. He had said he knew everything, hadn't he? Was this Carl's doing? she wondered.

Again the doctor correctly interpreted her thoughts, and gave her a wry smile. 'You don't want to listen to the local gossip,' he said in a half-amused tone, 'a lot of it is envy. If a man's wealthy, they call him lucky. It never occurs to them to think how he came by his wealth—or that he had to work for what he has. Given the same opportunities most of them would fail, simply because they hadn't the know-how, or couldn't be bothered to learn it; those are the ones that call themselves unlucky.'

Teresa knew that it was Carl Elton the doctor was talking about. Did her uncle come under the heading of the envious ones or the 'unlucky' ones? she

wondered. Unhappily, she had to admit the truth of that. It echoed more or less what Carl had said about the Raffertys' troubles being caused mainly by mismanagement, using the feud as a scapegoat for their failures.

Doctor Turnbull got up and patted her on the shoulder in a fatherly way. 'There's always two sides to an argument, Teresa. I'm only saying, don't do anything you might regret later. Give yourself plenty of time.'

It was all very well, thought Teresa miserably as she left the surgery a little while later, for the doctor to tell her not to worry, particularly after having told her that she alone held the key to her recovery.

All the answers were there, she thought bitterly, shrouded in her subconscious because she hadn't been able to face reality. Was she such a weak character, then? Or was it grief alone that had caused the rejection, as the doctor had said? She would have liked to have believed that, but she couldn't be certain, for there was a thin dividing line between grief and unhappiness, and if it was the latter, then it left a lot of unexplained events to be accounted for.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHEN Michael collected Teresa later that day to take her to Bathurst, she was in two minds as to whether or not to go, and was very tempted to plead a headache and call the whole thing off. But when she saw his cheery grin and his unconcealed pleasure at the prospect of spending an evening with her, she hadn't the heart to cry off.

As they drove to their destination she sat gazing out at the twinkling lights of the township in the distance, and her thoughts were not on the evening ahead, but still revolved on the morning's disclosures. It had not been easy for her to accept the fact that the answer for her dilemma lay in her own two hands, and if so, just what could she do about it? Receive yet another bump on the head? Her soft lips twisted wryly at the thought. Of course she could do exactly what the doctor had advised, and let nature take its course, which was easier said than done. What if she never regained her memory? She sighed deeply. It was an extremely depressing thought.

'A penny for them,' Michael remarked lightly. 'Or are you going all mysterious ovine again?'

Teresa sensed an underlying meaning in his words, and for the first time wondered if Michael thought that she was using her loss of memory to save face where Carl was concerned. Her uncle

wouldn't have been slow to state his views on the subject. But then Carl had thought so too, she recalled wearily. 'I saw the doctor today,' she said quietly. 'I was just thinking about what he told me.'

Michael glanced swiftly at her before returning his gaze to the road again. 'I don't know what you're worried about, Teresa,' he said soothingly. 'Everyone knows how it is. You've had a rotten deal all round.' He negotiated a bend, and drove the car into a parking area at the back of a large hotel. 'I should forget it if I were you. Just enjoy yourself. Did Elton try to talk you round?' he queried casually.

The question, though lightly asked, was not an idle one, and Teresa knew he had been waiting for an opportunity to bring the subject up. 'It wasn't a case of talking me round,' she answered despondently. 'It was more a case of introducing himself to me.'

Her voice was so low, and so weary that Michael, pulling up into the first space he came across, leaned over and patted her hand. 'Poor sweet,' he said consolingly. 'Well, it's over now. Promise me you won't give it another thought. We're going to enjoy ourselves tonight—and not only tonight,' he tacked on meaningly as he met her eyes, then seeing the doubt in hers he squeezed her hand tightly. 'You'll see,' he said quietly. 'This is only the start.'

'Michael—I can't promise anything,' she said swiftly. 'You do realise that, don't you?' she pleaded.

'I'm willing to risk it,' Michael replied gently, 'whatever happens.'

Teresa's spirits were at a low ebb as she allowed

herself to be guided into the hotel foyer. Michael was too nice a person to be hurt, and she only hoped to be able to keep him at a distance until she knew the state of her heart.

A little while later, after a delicious meal of iced melon, followed by rainbow trout with all the trimmings, with a little wine, Teresa felt more able to relax and push her worries out of her mind. Michael was right; she had gone through a bad time, and continually nagging at the problem wouldn't make things any easier: Answers never came when you pushed them, did they? she reminded herself. And how often did one get the answer to something they had worried about for ages, at a time when least expected? So she would forget her troubles, for this one night at least, and go ahead and enjoy _ herself.

She had just reached this decision when Michael asked her to dance, and she gladly accepted. The music, like the meal, was good; no canned tapes here, but a small band which played each number and gave an encore when requested by the appreciative dancers.

Teresa wasn't sure, but she thought the dance was a foxtrot, and after taking the first few tentative steps found that she was a good dancer, and was elated at the discovery. Michael was good, too, and she let herself relax completely in his arms as they circled the floor. If his hold was a little on the close side, she did not demur. Why should she? She liked Michael very much, and told herself dreamily that she might even fall in love with him.

It happened when the music changed to a soft

haunting melody that seemed to stab at her very heart. For a moment or so she closed her eyes, and stumbled slightly. Michael's arms tightened around her. 'Are you all right?' he asked anxiously.

Teresa could not speak, but nodded dumbly. Her head began to ache with an intensity she had not experienced before, and as Michael led her off the dance floor she found herself wanting to scream out at the band to stop playing that tune.

After seating her back at their table, Michael caught the eye of a waiter and ordered a brandy for her.

'What is it, Teresa?' he asked worriedly, noting that her complexion was as white as her dress.

She shook her head; she couldn't tell him—not at that moment. She was too full of the discovery she had made a few seconds ago, for then she thought she had been in someone else's arms; a tall, fair man whom she had loved with all her heart—Carl Elton!

Now that it was out, Teresa knew a sense of peace. Her head no longer ached, only her heart, and it felt as if it were slowly breaking. *Carl*, it whispered. 'How _could I have forgotten?' she asked herself silently.

Her fingers gripped her napkin hard; she had to leave, for other memories were crowding in on her, and she needed to be alone to accept them. 'I've a headache, Michael,' she said quietly. 'I'm sorry to break the evening up so early, but do you think we could go?'

Teresa never really remembered getting home

that evening. She quite purposely refused to think about anything except allaying Michael's fears that she was ill, and somehow managing to convey to him that she only had a headache, which after all might have been expected, considering that it was the first time she had spent an evening out since her accident.

She must have proved her point to him, for after attempting to make a date with her for the following day and having been gently refused on the excuse that she needed a rest, he had accepted her refusal with an equanimity that had made her want to hug him, and saying that he would look forward to their next date, he saw her into the chalet.

The following morning, Teresa awoke to a day that no longer held confusing side issues. Bit by bit, the past had slipped into place. She clearly remembered her old home, but more precious than that, she remembered her mother and brother, and had a curious sensation that they were very close to her. She hugged this thought to herself in grateful remembrance, praying that she would never ever find herself suspended in limbo again, not knowing, or being able to care about those who had loved her.

Her thoughts inevitably turned to Carl—not the pompous, overbearing man he had appeared to be, but to the man she knew; a warm, loving, and understanding personality. The one who had lifted her out of her misery and into the realms of light.

A tiny teardrop glistened on her lashes as she recalled what she had said to him not twenty-four hours ago, asking him what right he had to interfere

in her life. 'Every right?' she whispered to the silent room.

She could even remember the night of the party and the ensuing events, and sighed as she recalled his apology for what had happened. She now knew the reason why she had walked out on him that night. She had thought he did not love her, and she hadn't been able to bear it.

A slow smile quirked the corners of her full lips—
but he did love her ! So much so that he had been

willing to uproot himself from the home he loved, just to take her out of the firing line.

Teresa's thoughts roamed on, and she visualised her uncle's reaction to what he would consider her change of heart. But what did he know of her and Carl? He was so wrapped up in the past that he couldn't see that people change, and life moves on.

She frowned. Was it really necessary for them to go up north? Was it Uncle Patrick who was the fly in the ointment? The thought brought a smile to her lips. Well, she could handle Uncle Patrick! He wasn't going to be allowed to carry on this stupid rearguard action any longer—and as for Carl She closed her eyes. 'I'll make it up to you, my darling,' she whispered, 'and you won't have to uproot yourself,' she promised fervently.

After a quick shower she dressed in a blouse and jeans, and eyeing her meagre wardrobe, wished she had the rest of her clothes there so that she could have worn one of her special dresses for the date with Carl that evening, but as it was the rest of her luggage was still at Sunset Ridge, and she only had what

she had been able to bring with her on that fateful evening when she had walked out on him.

When she was ready Teresa went in search of her uncle; the sooner he knew she would be marrying Carl, the better. At the thought of the wedding, she stopped dead in her tracks. Carl had said ten days, and that was two days ago! That left not much more than a week for her to prepare her trousseau! She gasped, then suddenly remembered that Carl had bought her her wedding dress before they left England. He had wanted no hitch in the wedding arrangements, for they were to be married at Sunset Ridge, and she recalled his teasing comments at the time. 'There won't be any time for shopping, my love. I intend to show you over the property before the great day, and that will take up most of our time. There's so much I want to show you.'

Her steps almost broke into a dance as she continued on her way. Life was wonderful! Oh, how she wished Carl had made an earlier date with her; seven o'clock seemed aeons away.

She slowed up. Ought she to ring him? Her eyes sparkled; of course she would! She ought to have thought of that before

When she reached the kitchen, slip was surprised to find no evidence of her uncle having made himself a cup of tea. Everything was as she had left it the previous evening. She frowned, and called out down the corridor, 'Are you having a lie-in, Uncle?'

The silence that followed told Teresa that she was alone in the chalet, and she walked to the hall and looked at the message pad lying beside the telephone. As she saw her uncle's hurried scrawl of an

address, her brow cleared; he had evidently been called out on a job. He had mentioned that he would be extra busy from now on, for the 'wet', as he called, it, was due any time now, and it promised to be a record one. 'Everything comes to a halt, then,' he had explained. 'So folk try and get all cattle movement over by then.'

Going back to the kitchen, she made herself a cup of coffee; she was too excited to eat anything, and had just made the coffee when she remembered she had meant to ring Carl, and dashed back to the hall to make the call. Her heart thudded as she located the number she wanted and dialled it. What ought she to say? Would just 'Darling, I'm sorry,' be enough? She nodded to herself, he would understand what she was trying to tell him.

The call was answered by a woman with a strong Scots accent, and Teresa remembered it was Mrs Ray, Carl's housekeeper, and she wished her 'Good morning,' and asked if she could speak to Mr Elton.

Mrs Ray answered, sounding a little puzzled, as if trying to place the person on the other end of the line. 'I'm sorry, he's not here at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?' she asked.

Teresa thanked her but said no, she would be seeing him later that day, anyway, and rang off. She smiled as she wondered how long it would take Mrs Ray to work out who had called.

Back in the kitchen, she sat sipping her coffee and thought about Carl, and wondered where he had gone. He was, of course, a very busy man, and could have been anywhere on the ranch—or perhaps he was just out riding, enjoying a morning gallop?

Her thoughts roamed on, and she recalled the girl who had been at Sunset Ridge the day Carl had taken her back there. She frowned in an effort of concentration; she must have been introduced to her at the engagement party. Then she had it 1 Isobel Johns, her family were Carl's nearest neighbours, and Teresa remembered Carl saying that he had grown up with Isobel and her brothers as constant companions. Her look was wistful as she wondered if Carl was out riding with her now.

The peal of the doorbell brought her out of her reverie, and into a state of joy—it was Carl! She was sure it was, and she rushed to the door. Her welcoming smile froze on her face as her hopeful eyes met the cold blue ones of the very person she had been thinking about a few minutes ago.

Isobel Johns stood there, her eyes taking in the peeling paint of the front door, and Teresa could almost feel her repugnance at having to make a call in such a neighbourhood. 'Yes?' she said coolly, wondering why she had been so honoured, for it was clear that Miss Johns thought it was an honour.

'I want to talk to you,' Isobel said haughtily. 'Do you mind if I come in?'

Teresa stood aside. 'Not a bit,' she answered airily, and recalling her antagonism at their last meeting, knew it was no social call. 'Although I can hardly imagine what we can have to talk about,' she added frankly.

A whiff of expensive perfume assailed her as Isobel swept past her and waited to be shown into the sitting-room.

'In here,' said Teresa, and opened the door for her.

Her reaction to the room slightly echoed Carl's, and Teresa silently told herself she would make him pay for that, in the nicest possible way, of course!

With her eyes disdainfully resting on what might prove to be the best bet for a comfortable seat, Isobel drew off one of her white gloves, and fastidiously flicked it over the seat of the chair before she sat down, and Teresa felt her hackles rise. She had a temper to match her hair, and if Miss Johns didn't watch her step she would soon be on the receiving end of it !

'This lost memory,' began Isobel.

'I beg your pardon?' broke in Teresa in a dangerously low voice.

Isobel looked at her with narrowed eyes. 'You heard! ' she said thinly. 'And I might as well tell you, I don't believe a word of it! '

Teresa took a deep breath. Losing her temper wasn't going to help at this stage—later, perhaps I 'It happens to be true,' she replied quietly, 'whether you believe it or not.'

The girl leant forward towards her, and Teresa absently noted the fine cut of her yellow silk suit that artfully highlighted her curvaceous figure. 'Shall I tell you what I do think ?' she bit out.

Teresa met her look candidly. 'You will, anyway, won't you? So go ahead,' she said, keeping her voice light.

'I think you're using it as a way to bring Carl to heel,' Isobel hissed, and Teresa was shaken by the venom in her voice. 'You hadn't much choice when your uncle appeared on the scene, had you? He was a sight too early, wasn't he? He ought to have waited until after the wedding.' She shrugged dis-

dainfully. 'Not that that would have got you out of your dilemma—Carl would have thrown you out, anyway.'

Teresa sat very still, but her eyes never left the other girl. 'Go on,' she said softly.

'I'm right, aren't I?' Isobel said triumphantly. 'You might as well admit it. You won't be able to fool Carl much longer—oh, I'll agree that your ruse has worked so far. He really feels guilty about the whole thing; the poor darling feels bad enough about it to throw up Sunset Ridge.' She met the startled eyes. 'Oh, yes, I know all about his plans for moving up north, but that wouldn't suit you, would it? It's Sunset Ridge you want; like all the Raffertys you'll never be satisfied until you take over Sunset Ridge.'

Teresa was beyond questioning, the girl's rather biased point of view. The fact that Carl had discussed his plans with her hurt.

'I want to tell you here and now,' went on Isobel, 'that no matter what, no Rafferty will rule over Sunset Ridge. Carl might be able to forget your birth-right, but he'd never allow that. Why do you think he's tearing up his roots? Because he couldn't stomach that, that's why!'

The blood drained from Teresa's face and she felt sick. Isobel, seeing that her thrust had gone home, went on relentlessly. 'So you're wasting your time,' she grated. 'It won't take Carl long to work out what you're up to, and,' her eyes glinted at Teresa, 'I pity you when that happens.' Her contemptuous gaze swept the room, then returned to Teresa. 'If I were you, I'd settle for Michael Oates. It's a bit of a

comedown from what you were aiming for, but at least you'll land up with more than you'd get from Carl. He doesn't believe in handouts, not to the Raffertys, anyway.'

Teresa's shattered senses were somewhat revived on this last jibe. Not only was Isobel warning her off Carl, but she had the audacity to suggest another partner for her! 'Tell me, Miss Johns,' she asked in a voice that trembled slightly, she was so angry, 'have you any plans for Carl? You might as well be honest with me, I think we've got past the stage of the velvet glove treatment.'

Isobel Johns' eyes flashed and Teresa had her answer. She had known it all along, of course.

'As a matter of fact, I have,' she retorted sharply. 'I might as well put you in the picture. Carl will marry me—as he should have done. It was what both our parents wanted.' She carefully studied her well-manicured nails. 'He knows he's made a dreadful mistake with you. He didn't have to tell me that; he's been so miserable since he came back, it's obvious. For my part I'm really grateful to your uncle for jumping the gun like that.' Her eyes bored into Teresa. 'What chance of happiness would there be for either of you? Tell me that! If you really cared for Carl you'd keep out of his way.'

Teresa got up slowly, feeling as if every bone in her body had turned to jelly. She had had enough of Miss Johns' enlightening company for that morning, and intended to show her the door. 'It's been very ... interesting,' she managed to get out lightly, determined not to show her her true feelings. 'I expect you've other calls to make. So if you'll excuse

me——' She opened the sitting-room door and stood purposefully beside it.

Isobel got up swiftly; it was obvious she wasn't quite sure how to take Teresa's answer, and decided on one last snipe. 'You'll be wise to follow my advice,' she said smoothly. 'Your uncle hasn't long to go before retirement, has he?'

Teresa wondered what on earth she was getting at, and blinked as she tried to connect the question to the previous conversation, but failed.

'He'll need all the work he can get before then,' Isobel continued calmly. 'But I warn you, if you persist in this pathetic last-ditch stand, it won't only be you who feels the lash of Carl's temper when he finds out you've tricked him. Many of the ranchers who employ your uncle are friends of Carl—not only friends, but some are dependent on him for their livelihood because he has shares in their property. Just one word, Miss Cottam, that's all it would take, and your uncle wouldn't get another trucking order.' She brushed her hand lightly down her dress as if removing any particles of grime that had dared to cling to her. 'You might care to think about that side of things,' she added maliciously, 'and I shouldn't think the Oates would be too well off either. There are other auction premises, you know.'

On this shattering revelation she swept past Teresa and towards the door, and with her synthetic smile drawled, 'I'm sure you'll be sensible, won't you?'

For a few minutes after Isobel had gone, Teresa stood in the hallway, then as if jerking herself into

action she walked back to the kitchen and sat down at the kitchen table. With an almost automatic gesture she picked up her half-finished cup of coffee, but as the liquid touched her lips she grimaced and put it down again. The feel of the cold liquid on her lips served as a kind of shock treatment that awakened her dazed senses and brought her back to all the heartache she had pushed aside since she had regained her memory.

Her lips twisted wryly; and she had thought it was going to be so easy. A feeling of hopelessness overwhelmed her, and she sank her bowed head on to her arms resting on the table, unleashing her misery in tears.

Why couldn't she have been left in the state of limbo? Why had she to be awakened back to unhappiness? She gulped. Isobel Johns loved Carl too, that much was evident, and she had fought for him with the only weapons she had had available. Teresa utterly discounted her threats regarding her uncle's work; Carl was not a vindictive man, and she might have been tempted to discount the rest of Isobel's spiteful accusations, but for something she had said just before she had left—and that something dovetailed to a nicety with Teresa's previous thoughts. 'If you really love him, you'd leave him alone,' she had said.

Teresa swallowed. How right Isobel had been when she spoke of the slim chance of happiness for either of them. Hadn't she come to the same conclusion?

It hurt, but she made herself go over her last meeting with Carl, and how he had asserted that he

loved her and how, for her sake, he was willing to make a fresh start elsewhere; at this point, Isobel's harsh words struck through her consciousness : 'Carl might be able to forget your birthright, but no Rafferty will rule over Sunset Ridge.'

Teresa gave a shuddering sigh. Was it true? Was that the real reason why he had decided to pull up his roots? Her fingers clenched themselves into a tight ball; it was a question she would never know the answer to—Carl wouldn't be likely to tell her, would he? and she had a horrible suspicion that Isobel might well be right. She closed her eyes as she recalled Carl's stunned reaction to her uncle's disclosures that night. It was all there if one cared to look. He'd even admitted how he'd felt, and asked to be forgiven for his bitter reaction. Oh, yes, she thought, as she dried her face with her, by now, extremely damp handkerchief. He'd done his best to explain, and she had believed him, because she had wanted to!

Getting up slowly from the table, and with hands that shook slightly, she filled the kettle and put it on the stove. She was in need of a hot drink, but more than that she needed some task to keep her thoughts at bay. But try as she would, they kept hammering at her, refusing to be pushed aside.

She had so very nearly fallen into the pit that had been dug all those years ago. She couldn't jump over it, as she'd almost convinced herself she could. It was either keep away or go down—and not only her, she thought miserably, but Carl too, trapped by the spadework that had gone before. Would their love be strong enough to withstand the isolation?

For that was what it would be for Carl—away from his home and friends. She gulped; she couldn't answer that one either—only for herself—she loved him enough to try and make him happy, but then she wouldn't be the one making the sacrifice, would she? It was easy for her, but Carl would have to love her very much to even consider throwing everything up. Perhaps he did ... but what of the future? How long would it take for him to start to pine for the things he had left behind, for the ranch that had been built up over the years by his forefathers, of whom he was so justly proud? Here again, Isobel's voice intruded. 'He's so miserable.'

The kettle was boiling, and Teresa made herself some more coffee. Her hands no longer shook; she knew what she had to do—she really hadn't any option in the matter. In a way she was grateful to Isobel. But for her, she would have rushed headlong into the pit and dragged Carl with her. She straightened her slim shoulders; it wasn't going to be easy. She just had to act as if she didn't know him—in other words, Carl must never know she had regained her memory. She loved him enough to give him back his freedom, 'and his beloved Sunset Ridge.

CHAPTER NINE

WHEN Carl collected Teresa later that day, she half expected her uncle, who had returned a short while before, to put on a show of outraged feelings and add a few more pithy remarks calculated to infuriate him, and was highly relieved when he chose to confine his displeasure to a ferocious scowl directed at Carl and left it at that.

As Carl turned the car out of the turning to the chalet and on to the main road, he asked how she was, and on receiving a satisfactory answer, inquired politely whether she had enjoyed her evening out with Michael Oates—a little too politely, Teresa thought miserably, for it was obvious that he was jealous.

She managed to keep her reply light when she answered that she had really enjoyed it. Although this was not strictly true, she had enjoyed herself until a certain event had occurred that had forced her to end what might have been an extremely enjoyable date.

His barely concealed annoyance at this reply made her want to shout out to him that he need not be jealous of Michael, for he alone held her heart and would always do so. She pressed her lips together; these thoughts were dangerous. Teresa knew she would need all her strength to get through the evening, for it would have to be the last date she

would have with Carl. She wasn't a good enough actress to carry on the deception.

Her eyes alighted on Carl's lean tanned fingers lightly holding the wheel, and travelled up to his wrist where the blond hairs overlapped the strap of his wrist watch. There was such strength there, she thought sadly, and for one weak moment was tempted to lay her hand over that strong one so near to her and tell him everything—to let him take the burden off her shoulders. He would know how to comfort her.

As tears pricked her eyes, she looked away quickly out of the car window, and away from temptation. She had to be on her guard from now on, for it was the little things that could betray her. There had not been much time for her to get used to the reversal of her feelings towards him. It was, she mused, like finding yourself in the desert, completely alone and not knowing which way to go—then suddenly, all that you held dear was there waiting for you with open arms, arms that would ease away the heartache and loneliness. Her throat constricted; but it was a mirage, she told herself bitterly; a mirage she had only been allowed to catch sight of before it disappeared again, leaving her bereft and even more miserable than before.

When they came within the precincts of the ranch, Carl gave a running commentary on how, as the years progressed, various parts of the land had been cultivated and what it was now used for. Teresa listened, although she remembered that he had told her this before, when he had first brought her to his home. Her heart constricted as she realised

the effort he was making to bring her gently back to the beginning of things.

When they reached the homestead Carl ushered her into the house, and Teresa only just managed to prevent herself from addressing Mrs Ray, whom they passed in the hall, and admitted ruefully to herself that she would have to be on the lookout for any further incidences. It would, for instance, be most unfortunate if Isobel Johns just happened to call in, for she had actually called her by her name, hadn't she? and Carl would be instantly alerted should another confrontation take place. There was no doubt Isobel would seize on the opportunity of unmasking her to Carl, and she would not be likely to believe that her visit that morning had coincided with Teresa's return of memory. It would be a little too apt for her credulity, and Teresa had to admit that under the same circumstances she too would be just as sceptical.

Carl's low but intimate, 'Sit here, darling,' as he indicated a window seat to her, sent tremors of trepidation pulsating through Teresa, and she longed for the end of what was probably going to be the stiffest test of endurance she had ever had to face.

'I've spoken to Turnbull,' he said quietly as Teresa seated herself and he sat beside her. 'I guess it's going to be, as he told you, a question of time.' He picked up her hand and studied it, then slowly turned her palm towards him and bent his head and kissed it.

The feel of his lips on her skin made her tremble, and she made herself look away from that fair head of his and out to the paddocks fronting the homestead, so that he would not see the effect this action

had on her. She saw the verdant green of the paddocks, and her eyes lingered on some horses grazing in the distance—at least that was the scene in front of her, but all she really saw was one very big blond man, with eyes as blue as the sea on a summer's day, and the trick he had of raising one eyebrow slightly when either amused or annoyed. Lovingly, her mind's eye slowly traced over his face, to that strong jaw of his and the cleft in his chin. She caught the scent of aftershave mingled with the smell of tobacco, faint, but it was there, and it all went to make up the familiar and loving personality of the man she loved. His tan shirt and brown gabardine slacks, with matching brown and tan tie, would in happier times have produced a smile of approval from her. He was always very particular in his dress, and Teresa couldn't ever remember a time when he looked anything else but immaculate, no matter what he wore.

'Don't you want to know how we met?' he teased her lightly, as if sensing her constraint and putting his own interpretation on it.

Teresa swallowed. This was going to be worse than she had thought. To feel this way, and to have to sit and listen to things she had already recalled—and what was far worse, to have to pretend that it was all new to her—she didn't think she could do it!

Mercifully for her Carl decided not to press the point, but squeezed her hand and got up, saying that he was an extremely bad host, and would she like a drink? She nodded quickly. She needed a breathing space badly, and clutched at the opportunity offered.

With eyes that held a haunting sadness she

watched him walk over towards the side cabinet and start to mix the drinks placed on a tray there. She found she couldn't take her eyes off of him; it was as if she were desperately trying to memorise everything about him—his broad shoulders, the way his hair curled slightly at the edges, and the fine leonine shape of his head. Not a thing would she forget, she told herself, for his looks and bearing were burnt into her memory for what had seemed like years. She would never forget him, nor cease to love him, no matter what.

Some of her thoughts must have communicated themselves to him, as he swung round suddenly to meet her eyes. In that one unguarded moment she knew with dreadful certainty that he was aware of the truth.

There was a dull clink as he put down the glass he was holding, never for a second taking his eyes away from hers, and holding them in an inescapable hold covered the distance between them. She found herself crushed in his arms before she could utter a word of protest, and he was kissing her with an intensity that frightened her.

'Now tell me you don't know me,' he said softly, when he allowed her respite. 'Just try, that's all,' he whispered against her lips before crushing them to his once more.

Teresa never knew how she got the strength to pull herself away from him. Her love for him must have given her the spur she so badly needed. She wouldn't let him throw up all he held dear for her—she wouldn't! 'Very well,' she said breathlessly, 'I do know you,' and as he made a move to take her

into his arms again, she made a restraining gesture. 'Tut it's no use, Carl. I'm not marrying you.'

For a second or so his eyes reflected the shock she had given him, then they narrowed. 'Would you care to explain that?' he asked in a silky but dangerous voice.

Teresa quaked inwardly; she had never been afraid of Carl, but she was now. The man who stood before her and the man she had known were poles apart. This man was ruthless and would brook no denial. She could almost feel the tension of the leash he had put upon himself straining to the limit of endurance. Her fear was not physical but mental; he could so easily reduce her to a state of incapacity merely by touching her. This he knew very well, so it would be useless to try and deny it. He loved her and wanted her enough to break down physically the pathetic barriers she might try to use against him.

Her frantic mind tried to come with the answer to her problem; if she told him the real reason why she could not marry him, he would bulldoze through her reasoning in a matter of seconds, assuring her that her fears were groundless and the marriage would work out, thus leaving her no loophole.

'Well? I'm waiting,' he said with a note of warning in his voice that told her that her excuse had better be a good one!

Praying for inspiration, she tore her gaze away from him and concentrated on the pattern of the beautiful carpet at her feet, then without realising it, Carl gave her the lead she wanted.

'I suppose it's that damned feud, isn't it?' he said

harshly. 'Well, I told you once it wasn't going to take you from me, and I meant every word of it. So you can dismiss that for a start. We're going up north, remember ?'

The last words galvanised Teresa's numbed senses into action. How could he even consider such a proposition? Why, only a short while ago he was telling her the history of Sunset Ridge, and even she had caught the pride that had unknowingly crept into his voice as he spoke. With this thought came another, and brought with it a nagging suspicion that Isobel had been right in what she had said about Carl never allowing a Rafferty to rule Sunset Ridge, and it was this that gave her the courage to attain her goal. She wrenched herself away from his arms, that had once again enclosed her.

She walked over to a chair some way away from him, and steadfastly refusing to look at him said in a low voice, 'All right, if you want the truth, it is the feud—at least,' she amended wearily, 'that's how it started.' This time she did look at him. 'I don't love you, Carl,' she asserted quietly, hating herself for what she had to do to him. Seeing the purposeful set of his jaw and his move towards her, she shook her head warningly. 'Oh, I admit the physical attraction between us is still as strong as it was—but it's not enough.' Her voice faltered on these words; couldn't he see how hopeless it was? Why had she to be the only one who could see the misery ahead?

'I don't believe you,' he said flatly. 'There's more to this than meets the eye, and I mean to get to the bottom of it,' he threatened.

Teresa was near the end of her tether; it was all

or nothing now. She loved him, yet she hated him for what he was making her do. If only he'd given her one thought that night, all this heartbreak could have been avoided. 'Don't you see?' she cried out vehemently, her words holding the conviction she felt. 'I stopped loving you that night you turned away from me.' Once again her voice faltered, but she made herself go on. 'Can you imagine what you did to me?' she asked him bitterly. 'How I felt? You were everything to me,' she whispered, 'and you turned away from me.'

There was silence for a second or so, then she went on again, not trusting herself to look at him. 'I can't explain it, Carl,' she added wearily, 'everything went dead inside me.' She hesitated. 'Perhaps if I hadn't lost my people ...' This time she did look at him and was shocked by the look on his face. He was not looking at her, but beyond her at some distant object; probably reliving that night, she thought, and she longed to comfort him, to wipe out that stricken look and make him smile once more, but she couldn't do it. He had to see things as they were. One day, she told herself miserably, he'll thank me for this.

When he did speak, his voice was low and held a trace of bitterness in it. 'As I said once before, if I remember rightly, I get no second chance, is that it?'

Teresa hastily looked away from him and nodded dumbly. 'I'm so sorry,' she managed to whisper.

'I guess,' he said slowly, 'it couldn't have been the real thing for you in the first place, and yet ...' His words took on a deeper note and Teresa very nearly broke down. 'I could have sworn we were made for

each other. It just goes to show,' he added bitterly, 'how wrong one can be.' He looked at Teresa and his eyes seemed to pierce right through her. 'Forgiving is part of loving, Teresa, and if you can't forgive,' he shrugged, 'then I guess there's nothing left to say.'

For that at least, Teresa was grateful, for she knew she couldn't hold on much longer, and as if it were tacitly agreed that there was no point in dragging things out, he suggested stiffly that he took her back to her uncle.

The ride back was the longest and most unhappy journey Teresa could ever remember having to undertake. Carl seemed as far away from her in his thoughts as he had been the night she left him and she didn't attempt to break through his preoccupation.

When they arrived at the chalet Teresa got out of the car swiftly, and in a voice that hardly sounded like her own, said jerkily, 'Thank you, Carl—well, goodbye ...' She couldn't think of anything else to say, but knew he would understand.

He nodded his acceptance of her unspoken message that she would not be seeing him again. 'You might,' he said on a note of enforced brightness, 'wish me luck in my new venture up north.'

Teresa stared at him; what did he mean? There was no need for him to go up north now. 'Surely you'll stay at Sunset Ridge now, won't you?' she asked hesitantly.

Switching on the ignition, Carl gave her a half-bitter and half-mocking smile. 'I'm not planning to be around to watch you marry Oates,' he said harshly, and Teresa looked away hastily. The next

moment he had started the car up and was on his way out of her life.

As she let herself into the chalet, it was all Teresa could do to answer her uncle's gruff, 'I hope you gave him his come-uppance this time,' as she met him in the hall.

'Oh, I did,' she answered in a voice that trembled slightly. 'And you can't imagine how won ... wonderful it was.' The tears in her eyes were blinding her as she made her way to her room. It was nice to know, she thought bitterly, that someone was happy. She had no doubt that she had just made her uncle's day.

Her room seemed twice as bleak as it was before, the clinical whiteness of the walls seemed to echo her feelings of being shut away from warmth and love, and she shivered as if the cold in her heart had penetrated her very being.

As the tears cascaded down her face, she told herself she ought to be proud of herself. She had come through with flying colours. Carl had no inkling of the true state of her heart, and what it had cost her to give him up—and for what? A sob tore its way through her silent grief. He was still going up north! She had accomplished nothing! And she hadn't even been able to tell him that she had no intention of marrying Michael. Her lower lip caught in her teeth as she tried to stem her chaotic thoughts. She was the one who ought to go away, not Carl! He belonged here. Her tears increased in volume as she thought of him making a new life for himself, deliberately cutting himself off from all he loved.

It was the thought of Isobel that gradually

brought her back to a calmer state, bringing with it a kind of bitter-sweet reasoning. Isobel would fight for him, and make him see the utter senselessness of throwing everything up. Bitterness and hurt was blinding his judgment now, but given time he would come to accept that what had happened had happened for the best—even, she gulped, be thankful for the way things had turned out.

The following week, Teresa settled down to a day-to-day existence, not unlike the existence she had lived while her memory was impaired, only now she found herself waiting with a kind of doomsday expectation for news of Carl. If he did make the move up north she would be certain to hear of it, for as her uncle had said what seemed like years ago, when she had first gone to live with him, nothing an Elton did went uncommented upon. The fact that Carl was still at Sunset Ridge did not mean that he had changed his mind; there would be many things to wind up at that end, but Teresa was sure that the news of his impending departure would sweep through the small township like a bush fire.

She was also sure that it would be her uncle who would be first with the news. She had not told him of Carl's decision that night. It was enough that Uncle Patrick knew that it was over between them; the rest did not concern him. She also knew the day when such news might be expected to reach her, for Wednesday was the day her uncle took himself down to the local pub, and there he would have a gossip with several of his cronies, one of whom was Joe Spang who worked for Carl. At this thought Teresa's

lips had twisted wryly, for it had been Joe Spang who had started off the whole wretched affair. At this point Teresa had to rebuke herself sternly, for both he and her uncle had acted for the best. If she had married Carl ...

When her uncle returned that night Teresa steeled herself for the news she felt certain would be forthcoming, and as he said nothing, she was forced to inquire as casually as she was able whether he had enjoyed his evening out, and how was Joe?

Her uncle did not think there was anything unusual in this query, and answered readily enough. 'Sure, he's fine, but thinking of changing his employment,' he chuckled.

Teresa's heart missed a beat; now she would hear it? But she said nothing and waited for her uncle to enlarge on that, and he did.

'Seems there's no living with Elton these days,' he said slowly, savouring the thought. 'Joe says he's known sweeter-tempered cornered grizzlies '

Teresa winced inwardly but made herself stay calm. If her uncle expected the news to give her pleasure, then he was going to be disappointed, she thought, and waited for him to go on, her expression showing nothing of her thoughts. It might have been something about her stillness that prevented him from enlarging on this subject, for it was clear he would have liked to expound on this theme. However, to Teresa's dismay, he changed the conversation and gave her the latest news on the weather. 'The wet's set in further down south, and that means we'll be having our share within a week or two,' he commented.

It appeared that this was the extent of the news he had gathered, and Teresa allowed herself to hope that Carl had changed his mind and was staying after all. The fact that he was unleashing his temper on his employees was surely a healthy sign, wasn't it? she asked herself hopefully. He needed to get it out of his system and she would rather he did it that way than brood inwardly, although, she conceded, she did feel a little sorry for those on the receiving end.

Another week went by, and another Wednesday, without any startling disclosures from Uncle Patrick, and as the news was something he simply would not have been capable of keeping back from her—he would have been too delighted at the prospect of a Rafferty uprooting an Elton, which was precisely the way he would have seen it, Teresa mused shrewdly—it really looked as if her hope had been realised. It did, of course, also mean that Isobel had got through to him, and Teresa didn't know whether to feel glad or sorry about that. She only knew she wanted him to be happy, but try as she would, she couldn't see a vast amount of happiness in store for him as Isobel's husband. But then, she reminded herself sadly, she had only seen the vicious side of her—perhaps in the same circumstances; she too would produce claws and fight tooth and nail for what she considered was hers, particularly when she knew that if she lost it meant unhappiness for the one she loved.

Precisely two days later Teresa received the confirmation she was looking for in the form of an article in the local paper, accompanied by a photo-

graph of Carl shaking hands with a prosperous-looking man. The article was headed 'Sunset Ridge scoops deal in foreign trade.'

'Them that has gets!' commented her uncle bitterly, *peering over her shoulder as he passed* her chair and seeing the article. 'Heard he'd pulled off a big deal with a U.K. firm. As if he hadn't enough share of the market as it is,' he growled. He shook his head sadly. 'Sure the devil looks after his own, that's for certain,' he lamented.

It was not until Teresa was washing up the supper dishes later that evening that the full significance of the newspaper item reached through to her, and her hands stilled on the plate she was putting on the drying rack. Carl was staying! He must be—for she couldn't see him calmly handing over the fulfilling of a contract of that magnitude to a foreman. Her eyes glistened as she said a silent 'thank you' for the opportunity that had come at such an appropriate time.

As she wiped the dishes and stacked them away, her thoughts roamed on. Woman-like, she couldn't help feeling a little rebuffed at his apparent change of mind; although she hadn't wanted him to go up north, the gesture, had he carried it out, would have shown how much he loved her. It had only taken a fortnight, it seemed, for him to get her out of his system. He could hardly be termed a constant lover she thought with a stab of sorrow.

Impatiently she shook these thoughts away; Carl was being sensible, she argued silently with herself. He had picked up the threads of his life again, as indeed she had wished him to do. There would be

no lasting ill-effects of their association—on his part anyway, she thought sadly. The only one who had got hurt was herself. She sighed; she wouldn't have had it any other way, she told herself stoutly, and made an effort to put the whole episode out of her mind.

The following day was cloudy and oppressive, and Michael remarked cheerfully to Teresa when she arrived for work that he hoped she had brought her gumboots with her, as it looked as if she might need them later.

Teresa replied in the same vein, and said she didn't mind getting her feet wet—in fact, she would look forward to it. She had found she actually missed the variable weather of her homeland.

'Ah, but just wait until it comes,' answered Michael, grinning. 'It doesn't stop at rain; the heavens open and the place is awash before you can turn round.'

Teresa thought Michael was teasing her, and asked politely if he could row a boat, for to hear him tell it, there would be no other way she could report for work the next day; at which he chuckled and said, 'You'll see ! '

However, the threatened downpour held off for that day, and by the time Teresa got home that evening her head ached, and she fervently wished the rain would come, if only to relieve the oppressive stillness of the evening. Her depression deepened as her eyes fell on two large cases standing just inside the hall as she let herself in to the chalet.

On the top of the cases lay an envelope addressed to her in Carl's writing. With fingers that shook

slightly she opened the letter and read the contents. It was a short and very impersonal missive which told her that he apologised for not returning them to her before, and he hoped she hadn't been too inconvenienced without them.

Teresa swallowed and placed the letter back into the envelope, then gazed back at the cases and frowned. He must have forgotten her large trunk, and really, she thought sadly, had she been given the choice of which luggage she would have preferred delivered first, the trunk would have taken precedence, for inside it were photographs of her family and small unvaluable ornaments that she had kept from her old home. Unvaluable, that was, from the monetary point of view, but irreplaceable from the sentimental angle. Her eyes closed as she thought of the trunk's contents—of Rob's blazer with the International badge which she and her mother had gently squabbled over, on who should be given the honour of sewing it on—and compromised in the end by doing half each!

She passed a hand over her forehead and pushed back a tendril of her bright hair, as if by this slight action she could also push her memories away, but of course she couldn't. She had had some idea of giving the blazer to Carl. He and Rob had been much of the same build, and she knew it was a custom to exchange items of clothing with visiting teams, and also knew that Carl would have felt honoured to wear Rob's county colours.

Her uncle's van pulling up outside shook her out of her unhappy musings, and she dashed into the kitchen to start getting the meal ready. He would

be very hungry, as he had not had time that morning to sit down and eat what Teresa considered a good breakfast; and she doubted whether he had stopped to get himself something during the day. She did not consider a snatched sandwich, eaten while still driving, a substitute for a meal, and had only the other day scolded him about this practice. Not that she had had much success, for he had replied, 'It's only till the wet comes, girl. I'll be off the road then for a couple of days or so,' and looking down at his thin wiry frame, he had added ruefully, 'It's no use trying to fatten me up, you'll not alter this shape—'sides, I can't tuck it away like I used to.'

In spite of his air of gloomy preoccupation, Teresa had known that her interest, be it scolding, or just fussing over him, pleased him, and she sighed as she put the potatoes on to boil; she couldn't, she thought sadly, have come across two men with more conflicting convictions. Her uncle Patrick was stubborn, not to say pigheaded! And Carl ... she sighed again as she recalled her uncle's words when he introduced himself at their engagement party. "Tis a miracle, so it is '

As she busied herself with the rest of the preparations for the meal, a tiny voice inside her kept repeating these words until in sheer desperation she was forced to answer the taunt. 'Yes, and it'll take another miracle to put things right again,' she whispered fiercely.

CHAPTER TEN

THERE was still no sign of the promised deluge the following morning, and although the clouds were very much in evidence, Teresa did wonder if the 'wet', as everyone seemed to call it, had passed them by, and mentioned as much to Michael as she met him at the office door.

Glancing up at the sky, he shook his head firmly. 'I'd say any time now,' he said, adding considerably, 'It might hold off until the evening, and I hope it does. Dad and I are off to Bathurst after lunch, remember.' He gave Teresa a hand up the step to the office, holding on to her arm a little longer than necessary, and she was quite prepared for his next words. 'Should be all over by Saturday, Teresa. How about our unfinished date?'

Teresa hadn't the heart to refuse him. It would do no harm anyway; and it wasn't as if it mattered to Carl any more. She nodded quickly. 'Very well,' she replied lightly, and was rewarded by the quick squeeze of his hand on her arm and the delighted grin he gave her.

It was nice, she thought a little sardonically, that someone was still interested in her, and wondered if the day would ever come when she could seriously consider marrying Michael; for it was plain to see that he would grasp the earliest opportunity to propose to her, even though they had had as yet only

one date. It was the little things he did that spoke volumes when they were in the office together, and the way he would watch her when he thought she was unaware of his attention. And it was the little things that counted so much, she thought. There was no doubt that Michael would do his level best to make her happy. Perhaps one day ...

After lunch Michael and his father left for Bathurst, both leaving instructions that should the rain come, Teresa was to make tracks home right away if they weren't back by five, and Mr Oates gave her a key so that she could lock up when she left and not worry about the office being unattended.

Michael was still issuing instructions about how she should close all the windows in the chalet when she got home when his father yanked him out of the office, leaving Teresa smiling and thinking how very lucky she was to have such considerate employers. To be honest, she wasn't sorry to be on her own for a little while. The office was cosy, and she felt at home there. She now knew enough about the job to be able to get on with her work without having to ask questions about it. Not that she had much to do that afternoon. The following day was auction day, and things got a bit hectic from then on until the middle of the week, then quietened down again until the next auction.

When she had finished the work in hand she started tidying the filing index, which was apt to get a bit chaotic after Mr Oates had 'borrowed' it, and as he had had it that morning, Teresa was certain it was in dire need of a little reorganising. It was not a job that called for much concentration and her

mind followed its own leanings while her fingers were busy, and she went back to thinking of something that had rather puzzled her the night before when she had unpacked her cases. Her wedding gown had not been in either case, and she concluded that it was still hanging in the wardrobe of the guest room at Sunset Ridge. Whoever had packed the cases could not have realised that, yet she had the strangest conviction that it had been Carl himself, and if so he had deliberately omitted to pack it.

Teresa had so far not been able to come up with a plausible explanation as to why he should have made the omission, for one would have thought the sooner such an item was out of his house, the better. He had of course paid for the dress, and thinking about it now, it did occur to her that perhaps he was of the opinion that she might put it to a use other than the one he had originally intended. In other words, for her marriage to Michael!

This explanation, however, failed to satisfy her. She couldn't honestly believe that he would credit her with such mercurial, if not downright bad, taste. In the end she gave up the puzzle; it was something she might never know the answer to, and perhaps it was better that way.

The telephone rang shortly before five o'clock and the caller told her he had a message for her from her uncle, who had got bogged down on a place called Hatty's Hill, and would she collect the van and pick him up.

Teresa stared at the receiver in her hand. For one thing, she didn't know where Hatty's Hill was, and

for another, surely her uncle had meant the caller to get in touch with the firm from whom he'd hired the lorry? She sighed.

'I'll contact the hire firm,' she told the unknown caller, 'they'll know what to do.'

The answer she received to this was that her uncle had particularly said it was his niece he wanted to be contacted, and no one else. It appeared he had taken a short cut he shouldn't have taken, and would land himself in trouble if the hire firm got to know about it.

It all sounded distinctly odd to Teresa, and she was about to ask the caller why he hadn't given her uncle a hand, when he rang off. Well, she thought wryly, she hadn't much choice in the matter, and she wondered what he'd have done if she hadn't been able to drive, and was glad she had had a few experimental excursions in her uncle's van soon after she had joined him.

Locking up the office, she made her way to the back of the premises where she knew her uncle parked the van. If the van was locked then that would be that, but she was not at all surprised to find that it was not only unlocked, but the keys had been left in the ignition switch. That sort of negligence would have raised brows back home, she thought with a grin, but here it appeared to be normal procedure. Of course the premises were private, and there was little chance of the van being picked up by youths on a joyriding stunt, which was about the only serious crime the town was likely to come up against. The van was too dilapidated to evoke any such leanings, and Teresa herself had had grave

doubts of getting it back in one piece when she had first driven it. However, she had discovered that it looked worse than it was, and was in good running order.

On the way back to the chalet she pondered on the message she had received from her uncle, and wished Michael had been there at the time. For one thing, he would have been able to tell her just where this Hatty's Hill was, and for a second, would probably have gone with her. Thirdly, and more important, she could trust Michael not to mention the trip later, for it could have serious consequences for her uncle. The hire firm's rules were very precise, and she had often heard her uncle grumble about some of them; such as passing through stretches of land owned by certain landowners—in other words short cuts; which was precisely what he had taken. It wouldn't be the first time he had flouted the rules either, she knew, and his views on the subject were well known to her. 'Sure, if I played it by the book I'd be on the road all day. And I'm not the only one,' he had said.

Teresa sighed at these thoughts. No, he probably wasn't the only one, but he was the only one who had a running fight with the hire firm's manager, who wouldn't hesitate to read the riot act to him and very probably refuse to supply him with another truck. That, in effect, would mean the end of his working days, for he couldn't afford to buy the transport he needed for the job.

When she reached the chalet she got out all her uncle's maps of the district and searched for Hatty's Hill, eventually locating it on the outskirts of the

town. Not too far away, she mused, and it ought not to be too difficult to find. The next, thing she did was to search out a length of rope strong enough for the tow that would be needed, and placing it in the back of the van, she settled behind the wheel and was soon on her way.

By the time she had passed the 'township, she noticed with slight apprehension that it was getting darker by the minute and she knew instinctively that the long-awaited wet was about to descend. Remembering Michael's remarks on the volume expected, she automatically put her foot down on the pedal. If she got a move on, chances were she would reach her uncle before it broke.

Twenty minutes later a streak of lightning lit up the road in front of her, and was soon followed by an ominous clap of thunder. It seemed to Teresa that she was driving straight into the storm, for the further she travelled, the darker it got.

She passed the sign that stated Hatty's Hill lay some two miles further on, and gave a sigh of partial relief; it ought not to be too far now. Her relief, however, was short-lived, for the two miles passed and there was still no sign of a truck, and Teresa felt she ought by now to have found it.

The light was now non-existent, and the first drops of rain began to fall as she peered anxiously out of the screen window. In the distance she saw what might have been the shape of a lorry a little way ahead, and let out another sigh of relief. She had made it! and only just in time too, for the rain had begun in earnest now and **beat with staccato rhythm on the roof of the van.**

Borrowing her uncle's old oilskin cape, she threw it over her shoulders, and picking up the rope, she got out of the van and with head averted from the lashing rain made her way towards the dark shape in front of her, only to find on reaching it that it was not a truck, but an odd-shaped hill, rising as it were straight out of the ground. It was no consolation to Teresa that she was looking at Hatty's Hill, and she was too disappointed to wonder at the phenomenon in front of her, and certainly in no mood for a history lesson.

The rain increased its tempo, and she pulled the cape over her head and was forced to hold a hand over her eyes as she peered into the murky darkness all around her for some sign of her uncle's truck. It was then that she saw the light that sprang up at some point to her left, and held her attention in that direction. She could make out a but of some kind, and if it hadn't been for the light she wouldn't have seen it, for it lay among a thickly wooded area.

For a moment or so she hesitated, not sure what to do, whether to get back into the van and resume the search for the truck, or whether to make for the hut. From where she stood it was impossible to see if the truck was there, but it could well be, for the trees would camouflage it. In the end she decided to go on with the search; if she couldn't find Uncle Patrick, she would go back to the hut.

A short while later, after another fruitless search, Teresa had to abandon all, thought of locating her uncle, on Hatty's Hill anyway, and that left only one more place to try—the hut.

The light kept her steadily on course as she

guided the van down a gentle incline on to a rough track that was becoming steadily more difficult to negotiate as the rain pounded down, and it wasn't long before she came to the end of the track. By now the wheels of the van were barely holding the ground, and as Teresa slid to a halt, she knew it was the end of the line as far as transport went; she hadn't a hope of going on even if the track had not petered out at that point, and she only hoped that the occupant of the but wouldn't mind her seeking shelter there.

Her feet were now wet through, for she wore only light sandals, and the cape, though it protected her head and shoulders, only came to her waist, and within minutes she was soaked from the waist down.

Allowing herself a slight grin about her previous comment to Michael about not minding getting her feet wet, Teresa now had to concede that he had known what he was talking about, and could understand both his and his father's insistence that she should make tracks for home directly the rain came. Michael, she thought as she slithered her way down yet another slight incline towards the light, would be horrified if he could see her now. There was only one thing she could be grateful for at this time, and that was that the storm had passed, and the rain had well and truly taken over, for Teresa preferred rain any day to flashes of lightning, particularly as she was now surrounded by trees.

A little further on she came upon a low-slung bridge that spanned a narrow stream, and saw the light directly in front of her. She could now see that what she had thought was a but of some kind was in fact a cabin—a rather luxurious one, and she

doubted if it could be called a cabin either; it looked more like the ranch-type bungalows she had seen at home, the only difference being that this one was entirely made of wood.

As she crossed over the frail bridge, it went through Teresa's mind that her uncle might well have made his way there too. Had he been anywhere in the vicinity of Hatty's Hill, he couldn't have failed to see the light, as she had seen it. Once across the bridge, she had only a few yards to go to reach the cabin, and this was mostly uphill as the cabin was set on slightly higher ground and nestled into the hillside.

With a rueful glance down at her streaming sandals and clinging wet dress, she pressed the bell set into the framework of the pine doors, and waited with slight trepidation for her call to be answered, only too well aware of the mess she would make of the interior of such an establishment, particularly if it lived up to its outside proportions.

Extra light was thrown out as the door opened, and for a moment or so Teresa had to blink at the tall man who stood there, trying to accustom herself to bright light in front of her. Then she blinked again hard, and stared at Carl Elton. 'You l ' she whispered, as if trying to prove to herself that he wasn't a mirage.

His autocratic brows raised at the rather vehement reaction his appearance had produced on her, and he smiled wryly as he stood to one side, indicating that she should go in. 'Hardly the weather for visitors,' he commented dryly, 'but you're welcome anyway.'

Teresa had no choice but to go inside, although

she did fling a longing backward glance behind her in the hope that the rain had eased off and she could politely refuse his hospitality, but of course it hadn't, and seemed to be lashing down with even greater ferocity.

'In here,' drawled Carl, not a bit put out by the rivulets of water slowly trickling from Teresa and making damp patches on the expensive carpet as she squelched through the hall towards the door he held open for her.

She was about to enter the room, but stepped back smartly when she found it was a bathroom, and fixing a wary look at Carl she said rather unnecessarily, 'It's a bathroom!'

He nodded complacently. 'There's a drying cupboard in there too,' and he pointed to a bathrobe that hung behind the door. 'Put that on when you're ready.'

Teresa just stood staring at him; he didn't expect her to ... Apparently he did. His next words confirmed it. 'You can't,' he pointed out mildly, 'sit around all evening in wet clothes. You might as well make yourself comfortable, we've a long wait in front of us.'

'A long wait?' she echoed dully, very much afraid that she knew what he meant.

He nodded again, and there was a distinctly mocking light in his eyes, but his voice was still mild as if he was explaining things to a child. 'I very much doubt we shall be able to get out of the valley for at least three days.'

'Three days ' repeated Teresa in a stunned voice, then stared at him suspiciously. 'You're teasing me,

aren't you?' she asked, half belligerently yet half pleadingly.

This time he did grin, and her heart contracted at the familiar smile that at one time she thought he kept for her alone.

'You'll see,' he said airily, and gave her a slight push towards the bathroom. 'I don't want you catching a chill,' he added firmly. 'Now be a good girl and take a hot bath.'

Teresa did not feel in the least like being 'a good girl', but she did not have much choice in the matter. The thought of a bath and discarding her wet clothes was distinctly inviting, so she gave him an abrupt nod and entered the bathroom, firmly shutting the door behind her.

Carl's low, but amused, 'If you want any help, just shout,' made her glance hastily back at the door to see whether it had a lock or not; it hadn't, but his lightly added, 'I'll rustle us up some food. Come through when you're ready,' instantly relaxed her and she began to peel off her wet clothing.

Relaxing in the warm water, Teresa felt a drowsy peace creep over her, and would have loved to have stayed right where she was for hours and hours, but she knew she couldn't. It wouldn't do to fall asleep in his bath, she told herself sternly, and the fear that she might do just that made her hastily grab the towel lying on a nearby cabinet and get out of the bath.

As she towelled herself down her thoughts were on Carl's extraordinary remark about them being unable to get out of the valley for three days. She didn't want to believe it, but she had a nagging

suspicion that, like Michael, he knew what he was talking about—and what of Uncle Patrick? Her vigorous rubbing strokes stilled at the thought. Here she was, warm and dry, while he ... And she hadn't even given him a thought until now I Hadn't even asked Carl if he had seen anything of him—or, come to that, even explained why she had been out in that downpour I Not, she conceded ruefully, that Carl had given her much chance to explain—and he hadn't, she thought suddenly, even been surprised to see her—almost as if he'd been expecting her I She shook her head bewilderedly. He couldn't have been expecting her 1 How stupid of her to even think he was 1

With renewed vigour she finished drying herself and slipped on the bathrobe Carl had shown her. It was obviously his, and as Teresa lost herself in its generous proportions, she knew a sense of infinite sadness, and for a moment or so allowed herself the luxury of burying her face in its rough but oddly comforting material.

At the familiar pricking behind her eyes, she hastily started to gather up her clothes from the bathroom floor and looked for the drying cupboard Carl had mentioned, and finding it, was about to place her blue cotton dress on the rack when a splash of mud on the hem caught her eye, and she knew she would have to do something about that. She rinsed it quickly under the cold water tap, and thought that while she was at it she might as well rinse through her other clothes; it was plain she would be going nowhere that night.

Until that moment Teresa hadn't realised the

implications of her predicament, but now they hit her with startling clarity. Where, for goodness' sake, was she going to sleep? From what she had so far seen of the cabin, she was of the opinion that it was a bachelor establishment. Her eyes went over the bathroom; no fripperies here, not even talcum powder or mirrors—well, only a modest one on what she suspected was a medicine cabinet on the wall opposite her. Carl's voice cut through her musings and she hastily replied that she was just coming.

As she left the bathroom she was grateful for the all-enveloping robe she wore, which just reached her bare feet, and she padded along the carpeted corridor to where she could see a door standing open directly off the hall.

'Ah, there you are said Carl, straightening up from attending to a sort of barbecue attachment hung over a bright blazing fire, from which the delicious smell of grilled steak was emanating. 'Feel better now ?' he asked casually as he turned his attention once more to the food on the grill.

'Very much better, thank you,' replied Teresa, now feeling a little embarrassed and hating to think what she looked like wrapped up like a mummy, with her hair all fluffed up from the hard rubbing she had given it.

'Well, don't just stand there,' he said, grinning, and pointed to a large comfortable-looking couch in front of the fire. 'Make yourself comfortable. Tucker will be ready any minute now. I hope you've worked up an appetite.'

Teresa had to admit to herself that the steaks did smell good, as she settled on the couch. She hadn't

eaten since midday anyway, and then only a couple of sandwiches. 'It certainly smells good,' she said carefully, trying not to enthuse too much or show her quiet happiness at finding herself alone with him again. At this thought she realised that she ought to try and explain why she was there, and wondered yet again why Carl hadn't asked her what she was doing wandering about in that weather. She glanced towards the windows and saw they were shuttered inside, and probably outside too, she surmised; but even so, she could still hear the rain pounding down, and gave a little shiver of appreciation that she was so warm and comfortable—then she remembered her uncle.

'I know you'll think it's a stupid question,' she said quickly, 'but have you seen anything of my uncle?' and noting the rise of his brows at the question, hurried on. 'I was out looking for him,' she explained. 'You see, I received a call just before I left work. Someone rang to say he was bogged down on Hatty's Hill—Uncle Patrick, I mean,' she added swiftly, 'and he wanted me to go and fetch him.'

Carl's attention seemed to be still with the steaks, but after a second he took his eyes off them and turned to her, saying mildly, 'How extraordinary!'

Teresa did not like the way he said that—as if such a happening was extremely unlikely. 'Why extraordinary?' she demanded, with the light of battle in her eyes. If he was suggesting that her excuse for landing up on his doorstep was a lame one, he'd better think again!

This time Carl offered her a longer glance, and it was an enigmatical one, before he said mildly, 'I

didn't say I disbelieved you, only it doesn't sound like Patrick Rafferty. For instance, just what did he expect you to do? If he had got bogged down, I mean. I really don't see how you could have helped him, do you?' he teased with twinkling eyes.

His amusement made things worse for her, and she wished she could have got up and simply walked out on him, but she couldn't, and he knew it. 'At least I would have tried to help,' she said crossly. 'I took a coil of rope with me for the towing out,' she added for good measure, to show him that she wasn't quite so useless as he had implied, and ended lamely with, 'Anyway, there wasn't anyone else he could ask,' realising a little too late that she couldn't tell him the specific reason why he couldn't ask anyone else.

'Because he was trespassing, you mean?' said Carl, the amusement even more apparent now. 'Oh, yes,' he grinned, meeting Teresa's startled eyes, 'if he was on Hatty's Hill he was trespassing all right! It's my land, you see,' he told her with a mocking light in his eyes.

There wasn't much Teresa could say to that, so she contented herself with gazing at the fire and avoiding his eyes. Then another thought struck her. 'Does he know you have a cabin here?' she asked suddenly.

He gave a wicked grin at that. 'Almost sure to,' he answered casually. 'It's been here long enough. It's what you might call a retreat of mine.'

Teresa's glance went back to the fire hastily, for there was something in the way he had said 'retreat' that had a slightly bitter echo to it, and she felt the

heat rise in her cheeks. Well, her uncle would not make for the cabin! He had been trespassing, and was not likely to confirm it by turning up on Carl's doorstep. He might have risked it with anyone else, but not Carl!

She accepted a plate from Carl with an abstracted air, a frown creasing her smooth forehead. Of course, Uncle Patrick did have the truck and was under cover, but he couldn't stay there for days; he'd need food, wouldn't he?

Placing a large steak on her plate, Carl said quietly, 'I shouldn't worry about him. If I know Patrick Rafferty he's well under cover by now. He's too old a hand to get caught out in the open when the wet's about to start.'

Teresa's worried eyes met his blue ones, and she looked away again from the silent message she read in his, and in an effort to calm her thumping heart she protested quickly, 'Tut he has his job to do. He can't just down tools when he wants to.'

Carl came and sat next to her, and she wished he had taken another seat, preferably across the room. 'Your uncle,' he answered calmly, putting a knife and fork into her hands and picking up his plate of steak, 'comes from a long line of landstock. He'd know when that rain would come, and he'd have planned his route accordingly. Now, no more worrying over that score. Eat your food before it gets cold.'

She did as he ordered, but even though she enjoyed the meal she couldn't help feeling a little niggling worry over her uncle, in spite of Carl's assertion that he wouldn't have got caught in the

downpour. Knowing how Carl felt about him, *she* knew it was easy for him to dismiss the whole thing from his mind, and that made it harder for Teresa to believe wholeheartedly what he said. Not that she believed that he would deliberately lie to her, but there was no denying that he had little liking for her uncle.

In an effort to keep these thoughts at bay she offered to do the washing-up, and this produced another lazy grin from Carl, who said, 'Later, perhaps. I've some coffee simmering on the stove,' and disappeared into the next room, which Teresa presumed was the kitchen.

Teresa hadn't much liked the 'later' bit, and couldn't help wondering with a pang of trepidation just how he intended to fill in the rest of the evening. Then she scolded herself for not keeping a tighter rein on her thoughts. There was no reason why they shouldn't have an exceptionally pleasant evening just talking—on what subject she couldn't imagine, particularly when she recalled that certain look in his eye a few moments ago. In desperation she turned her attention to the room. It was, as she had suspected, a bachelor's domain, as indeed Carl had said. There were no frills here either. The room appeared to be a cross between a sort of study and sitting-room. There was a handsome old desk standing against the wall opposite her which suggested that the room had been used as a makeshift office at one time.

Her eyes roamed on; there were no pictures on the cream-painted walls. On the wall above the fireplace hung a shotgun with a finely wrought handle;

a gun, she told herself practically, would be a necessary item out there in the wilds. Nevertheless she gave a slight shiver at the sight of it. She had heard tales of wild dogs, called dingoes, out there, that roamed in packs and could tear a sheep to pieces in minutes. Quickly turning her thoughts elsewhere, she stared at the blazing fire. If it hadn't been for her uncle, she could have really enjoyed this evening. The room was spartan, but cosy, and knowing that it was Carl's made it even more welcoming in her eyes. If only she could be sure about her uncle!

'You're still not satisfied, are you?' accused Carl as he carried in a tray containing a coffee jug and cups and saucers.

Teresa flushed; she had never been able to hide her feelings from him, she thought miserably. 'It's just that ...' she began lamely.

'Look, I'm calling up Sunset Ridge after coffee. I'll make inquiries for you. Now will you relax?'

She nodded gratefully. 'Thank you, Carl. I know it's stupid, and I'm sure you're right, and he's all right. I just want to make sure, that's all.'

Placing the tray on a table, he nodded abruptly and concentrated on pouring out the coffee, leaving Teresa with an unhappy sensation that she had hurt him by not believing him.

After coffee, Carl lit a cigarette; he did not offer her one, as he knew she did not smoke, but liked the smell of the strong tobacco. She badly wanted to relax; to put her head back on the couch and close her eyes, for the warmth from the fire was making her drowsy, but she daren't be off her guard for one second. Carl was too near her, and she knew she

had only to move slightly and she would come into contact with him, and that must be avoided at all costs—particularly as she was dressed like this—or rather, not dressed! Her eyes passed slowly down the robe she wore, and she gave a start of horror when she saw a slight gap in the front and hurriedly folded the robe over it.

'I suppose,' mused Carl, in a voice that sounded rather regretful, 'you'd better get dressed.'

Teresa stared at him; would her clothes be dry? Before she could ask the question Carl got up, saying casually, 'Follow me.'

He led her along the passage and past the bathroom to a room just beyond it, commenting as he opened the door, 'Guest room—or at least it will be for a day or so.'

Following him into the room, Teresa saw that it was a bedroom—a double bed at that—and she made herself look elsewhere, but she couldn't help wondering what use Carl had for a double bed in his bachelor establishment. Then her eye fell on a very familiar object at the other end of the room. She stared at it.

'My trunk!' she said bewilderedly, and turned to Carl, who stood watching her with waiting eyes. 'What is it doing here?' she asked.

Giving her a rueful look, he said almost apologetically, 'Well, I had it sent here when it first arrived. You see,' he said carefully, 'I had a sort of plan that we might spend part of our honeymoon here.'

Teresa blushed scarlet. How could he? He seemed unperturbed by her embarrassment, and went on

calmly, 'However, things didn't pan out, did they? I guess it's Paris for me now,' he added meaningly.

The colour left Teresa's face, and she went white. He had no need to say that either, she thought bitterly. Paris would be Isobel's idea of a honeymoon, wouldn't it? He was, in fact, telling her that he would be marrying Isobel!

She drew herself up stiffly and gave an abrupt nod to show him that she had got the message, and pointedly looked at the door. 'I'll get dressed, then,' she said quietly. 'If you'll excuse me?' It was said in much the same way as she would have spoken to a stranger and Carl knew it. His lips straightened and he walked towards the door, saying just before he left, 'I'll make that call I told you about. Come through when you're ready.'

Teresa did not move from where she stood for several seconds after he had gone. She would dearly have loved to have given way to her feelings and cried her heart out. So that was why her trunk had not been with the rest of her luggage. As she stared at it, the sight of it brought back memories she could have done without at this moment. Carl's teasing words, for instance: 'You can show me the family album on our honeymoon. I've a plan to take you away from the madding crowd, as they say.'

Teresa's hands clenched by her side. So this was where they would have come. It also explained the double bed. She swallowed. It was of no comfort now for her to know how wonderful it would have been. Just her and Carl, and no interruptions.

As a tear fell, she hastily wiped it away; she couldn't let him see how unhappy she was. She had

stopped loving him, hadn't she? All she had been through would count for nothing if she gave way now. She just had to remind herself that he was now back where he belonged, and she couldn't—wouldn't be stupid enough to ruin everything now, or he would be making plans to go up north again, and she would be back to square one with a vengeance.

Squaring her slim shoulders, she sat about opening the trunk. There were several dresses to choose from, for she had packed what might be called 'winter wear' in it, and other items of clothing that would not be needed directly. In fact she would find everything she needed, even shoes. Picking up the key that hung from a tape attached to the handle, she unlocked it, to begin her search for the necessary items.

In spite of her resolve not to break down it was the immediate contents of the trunk that proved her undoing, for lying on the top was a photograph of her mother and Rob. It was the latest that had been taken, and it was one that Teresa herself had taken, and although she knew she ought to have put it to one side and resumed the search for the clothes she needed, she just couldn't do it, but stayed where she was, kneeling on the floor and staring at the photograph. The next moment she had clutched it to her breast with a fierce kind of intensity—it was all she had left, wasn't it? She had nothing else ... nothing !

She was not aware of time, not aware of anything, until gentle but firm hands pulled her up from the floor and made her ease the rest of her grief out in

Carl's arms, just letting it come until he deemed it time to call a halt. 'That's enough now,' he told her softly, 'stop it, honey, do you hear?' and he gave her a gentle shake.

Teresa drew one last long sob and lay exhausted against his strong shoulder. Her breath coming in ragged gasps as she tried desperately to pull herself together.

Carl cradled her close to him, and dimly she heard his voice as if it came from a great distance. 'Don't, honey! I didn't mean it to be this way, but I hadn't any other choice.'

The words held no meaning for Teresa then. She only knew that he held her and was comforting her as only he could, and she nodded dumbly as if in answer to his words.

After a short while, she had recovered sufficiently to listen to what he said about the result of his call to Sunset Ridge.

'Your uncle's okay, Teresa, I told you so, didn't I? I got one of my men to take a run down to the chalet to find out for you. He's just rung back.'

Teresa nodded gratefully; she couldn't look at him. 'I ought to get dressed,' she hiccupped.

'Okay,' said Carl, but he seemed in no hurry to leave. 'Sure you're all right now?' he asked.

She gulped and answered this time a little more firmly, 'I'm sure. Thank you, Carl ...' she couldn't say any more, but he understood and turned towards the door.

'Don't be long,' he ordered gently as he closed the door behind him.

Teresa got out the first dress she came across, a

blue-green jersey wool one, and the underthings she required, and quickly dressed. Before she joined Carl, she slipped into the bathroom and rinsed her face in cold water in an effort to remove all signs of her emotional upset. She hadn't the heart to take a peek at herself in the small cabinet mirror. She didn't need confirmation that she looked a sight, and it wouldn't have helped one bit to restore her confidence. Resolutely refusing to look at herself, she smoothed her hair back and went in search of Carl.

There was only one little consolation for her, and that was that he had understood why she had broken down like that, and was not likely to put any other interpretation on it. Her secret was still safe.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LIKE that dress,' was Carl's first comment when she joined him again, and lightly touching her hair, he remarked, 'I don't know why you had to alter this either. It's beautiful.'

Teresa drew back sharply from his touch; she was in dangerous waters again. Why couldn't he behave himself? He was marrying Isobel, wasn't he? It looked as if he had every intention of taking advantage of the situation they had found themselves in. It didn't matter one whit to him whether she cared or not. He was quite safe, she thought bitterly.

Accepting her quick withdrawal from his proximity with an exaggerated sigh, he then asked her if she would like some music; he had, he said, some rather nice records.

She would have liked to have said yes, but dared not. He might ask her to dance should the music be suitable, and she couldn't risk it; instead she changed the conversation subtly by asking about the message he had sent to Sunset Ridge, and had he mentioned that she was with him, and would his foreman have passed on the message to her uncle?

The answer was yes in both cases, and it seemed to Teresa that he appeared to relish the second one, and she wondered why. 'I suppose he didn't say how he got back from Hatty's Hill, did he?' she persisted.

Her question was met with a look she couldn't

interpret, as he answered carefully, 'I'm afraid not.'

Teresa wished she knew what he was thinking, for it was obvious he was amused by something; then she had it! *The foreman had probably related*

Uncle Patrick's comments on learning where she was, and what was more relative, who she was with! Oh yes, she thought wearily, her uncle would have been very vocal on that point. No wonder Carl was amused!

She stared at the photograph on the desk beside her, not wanting to show Carl that she had guessed what was amusing him. The photograph showed a group of rugby players; Carl was there too, and she started when she felt his arm slide round her waist as he came and stood beside her. 'That's the team I toured England with,' he commented, keeping a firm hold round her waist even though he knew she was trying to pull away from him.

If this is a sample of what I'm going to have to put up with, she thought bitterly, then the sooner he's put into the picture the better, and she swung towards him with blazing eyes. 'Would you mind keeping your distance?' she said furiously. 'It's not very gentlemanly of you to take advantage of the situation, is it?'

She saw his lips tighten, and the next moment she was pulled into his arms with a force that knocked the breath out of her. 'I don't feel very gentlemanly,' he grated out harshly, 'and I'm getting a little tired of being given the run-around treatment. A few minutes ago you were in my arms—just like it used to be—now you're telling me to keep my distance. You can't have it both ways, you know.'

Teresa flushed at the rebuke, but it hadn't been her fault. If he had left her alone she would have had her cry and got over it. 'I didn't ask you to comfort me,' she said in a low unsteady voice.

Carl's eyes met hers. 'Would you rather I'd kept away?' he asked softly. 'Listening to your heart break, and not caring?'

His words cut her to the heart, and she could no longer meet his eyes, focusing them at some point beyond him, and she was entirely unprepared for his swift hard kiss that gradually got more and more insistent. He wasn't taking no for an answer, Teresa thought bewilderedly, and before long she found herself answering the lips that were posing the age-old question.

A little while later, Carl looked down into her eyes that were now dazed and full of the love she felt for him. 'Now tell me you're not marrying me,' he threatened softly, 'and I'll wring your lovely neck.'

Teresa came out of her beatific state with a jolt. What had she done? Her eyes showed her feelings. 'And don't look at me like that,' he growled, 'I've seen that look before. If you're going to bring up that old chestnut about it being only physical between us, then don't. It's a waste of time. It damn near caught me last time, but I know better now.'

Teresa closed her eyes; she loved him so much, why couldn't she tell him the truth? It was here that Isobel came to her rescue again. How could he say these things to her—what about Isobel? Was it sheer pride that made him want to break her?

She swallowed. 'Nothing's changed, Carl. It's as I

said before. Too much has happened,' she said in a low voice.

'You're damn right it has he exploded. 'But it's nothing to what's going to happen if you persist in this farce. What if I told you I know about Isobel's visit to you?' he demanded suddenly, bringing Teresa's startled eyes back to his, and he nodded grimly. 'I didn't get the exact details from her, but I can guess the kind of tactic she used. Isobel can be very persuasive when she wants a thing badly enough.'

Teresa looked away quickly before he saw the tears in her eyes. But Isobel had been right in what she had said, she thought. 'She didn't feel you'd be happy up north,' she murmured, still in that low weary voice.

'So I gathered,' Carl said dryly. 'The fact that I'd decided to go ahead anyway provoked her into revealing that she'd been to see you. She let slip a remark that I ought to be grateful to her, something on the lines of all the trouble she'd been to to make you see sense.'

He gently caught Teresa's chin, forcing her to look at him. 'She did get through to you, didn't she? And you fell for it. Well, it hasn't worked. We're getting married and going up north, just as I said, so you might as well get used to the idea.'

He loved her, she thought sadly, but not quite enough to forget she was a Rafferty, and that was why they had to go away. Oh, it was physical all right, she thought bitterly, but how long would it last?

She moved away from him and sat down on the

couch, then looked up to meet his eyes. 'Why can't we stay at Sunset Ridge?' she asked quietly, feeling her heart plummeting to the depths as she noted the tightening of his jaw.

'Because I want no echo of the past around us,' he said implacably, and Teresa knew there would be no second thoughts on the matter as far as he was concerned. There would be no second thoughts for her either; not on those conditions. There was too much at stake for her to risk it. It wasn't that she was being unrealistic about it, it meant a lot to her. If Carl had said, 'I want what you want,' she might have accepted his decision, for she loved him enough to comply with what he thought right, but he hadn't. He had given her no choice in the matter, almost, she mused, as if he were saying that it was enough that he was prepared to marry her. She then remembered the newspaper article. 'How can you leave Sunset Ridge? What about that contract you got from abroad?' she asked suddenly.

He smiled at this, for a moment forgetting that he had not as yet got his way. 'Oh, I can fix things up at this end before we leave. I've decided not to sell up here. I intend to keep the place going and start a new herd up north. The two ranches should complement each other inside a few years. I needed to branch out anyway.'

This was worse than Teresa had thought, and she could see the eventual future; Carl making several trips down to his beloved home and leaving her up north. The trips would get more frequent as time passed ... She swallowed; it didn't bear thinking about, but it did give her the courage to

stand by her decision. 'I'm glad it wasn't a wasted trip up north for you,' she said, keeping her voice casual. 'For your needs, I mean.' Her eyes met his again. 'Because I'm not marrying you, Carl, no matter what you say.'

'I'm afraid you'll find you've no choice in the matter,' he answered just as casually, making her start at the cool way he had made such an astounding statement.

How could he be so sure? she wondered as she kept a wary eye on him. Her eyes widened as she thought of one way he could make his assertion come true. He wouldn't—he couldn't—not that, she thought wildly, and yet the possibility was there. Her uncle had said she wasn't to underestimate him, hadn't he? That he wasn't a man to play fast and loose with. She swallowed; it wasn't the ideal time for her to discover the truth of that, but if he did choose that way she'd never forgive him, even though she loved him.

Carl, watching her closely, took full note of the wide eyes and the panic-stricken expression in them as her thoughts were echoed in them. 'I've no need to go that far,' he assured her gently, adding harshly, 'but make no mistake on my feelings in this. If there was no other way, I'd be capable of even that.'

Teresa's eyes never left his face, and she knew he had meant what he said. There was still the vexing question of how he meant to gain her co-operation. She was in an extremely awkward position; through no fault of her own she had been forced to spend the night in his cabin, and not only one night, she thought miserably, but probably two or even three.

She gasped as the solution hit her—so that was it!

'Just because we're marooned here,' she began slowly, 'it doesn't mean we have to marry,' and hesitated as she saw the wicked grin these words produced from Carl, and flushed as he added dryly, 'For probably two or three nights?' but she refused to be sidetracked. 'All right!' she agreed crossly. 'For two or three nights—not,' she emphasised, 'that it was anyone's fault. I was out looking for my uncle, if you remember, and I'm pretty sure no one will attach much importance to the fact that I had to seek shelter here.'

Carl shook his head slowly at her, the amusement still in his eyes, and Teresa felt like screaming at him. 'I'm afraid you're way off, honey, if you're relying on the milk of human kindness. We were engaged, weren't we? And not one soul is going to believe you just happened to land up on my doorstep.' He pulled a wry face at her. 'So you see, my love, I've got to make an honest woman of you.'

Temper brought two bright spots to Teresa's cheeks, and her lovely eyes flashed like jewels. 'You're forgetting my uncle, aren't you?' she managed to get out acidly. 'Just try and get him to see your point of view!'

Carl's grin grew wider and Teresa found her gaze centring on a cut-glass ash tray that she would have loved to throw at him. 'Ah, yes, Patrick Rafferty,' he said slowly, as if savouring the name. 'Now that's one ally I can rely on.'

Teresa's mouth opened in sheer surprise, then she closed it with a snap. He was teasing her, of course!

Carl watched her reaction with his head on one

side and one autocratic brow raised, then caught one of her clenched hands and gently prised it open. 'I'm afraid you've another shock coming, my love. Your uncle Patrick, if I'm not much mistaken, will be the first one to beat a path to our door as soon as the weather permits—demanding that I marry you.'

'I don't believe you,' retorted Teresa when she had slightly recovered. 'He knows why I'm here,' she said slowly, still working things out in her mind. 'He'll tell everyone why I was out in that weather—even though he was trespassing!' she added for good measure.

'What if he wasn't on Hatty's Hill?' asked Carl casually; too casually.

'Of course he was ' snapped Teresa. 'I told you! Someone rang me with a message from him, and,' she added triumphantly, 'it can be proved! Whoever the man was, he'll remember my uncle asking him to make that call, won't he? So there's no mystery there! '

'Isn't there?' asked Carl, still in that casual voice. 'And what if the caller prefers to remain anonymous?'

'For goodness' sake I ' Teresa answered angrily. 'Why on earth should he?'

'I could,' he replied lightly, 'think of several reasons. One being that your uncle didn't ask for help.'

Teresa took a deep breath; now he was saying that she had lied to him, and had quite deliberately got stranded on his doorstep!

Still keeping a close watch on her, Carl went on lightly, 'You're way off beam again, honey.'

Her furious eyes met his amused ones. Why was he so sure he had the answer? Teresa's thoughts went back to the time she received the call. If only the man had given a name, but he'd rung off before she could ask who was calling. Her brow creased; had it been a hoax? If so, for what purpose? Her eyes alighted on Carl, who had what could only be called a smug expression on his face. She thought back to the events leading to her arrival at the cabin. The light! if she hadn't seen the light she wouldn't have come. Now that she had got so far, other things came to mind. There had been no light on the outside of the cabin, and that meant that one window must have been unshuttered. Her eyes went to the window, now firmly shuttered. As the revelation hit her, a little ditty went through her mind: 'Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly' I

'You r she gasped. 'You made that call, didn't you? My uncle was not on Hatty's Hill, was he?' she demanded furiously.

'It sure took you a long time to get the message,' he drawled maddeningly. 'And I as good as told you, not so long ago.'

Teresa was too incensed to work that out. 'Of all the dirty tricks! she cried. 'Why, I might easily have got lost—and in that weather too!'

'Anyone would have put you right if you'd gone off track,' he grinned.

'Only there wasn't anyone to ask, was there?' she said bitterly. 'And how could you be certain I'd land up here? I was in two minds whether to come anyway.'

'Because there wasn't anywhere else you could

go,' he answered with infuriating calm. 'Once you were past the hump of Hatty's Hill, it wouldn't be long before you came up against the border fence of my property. But you didn't go that far, did you?'

'How do you know I didn't?' she said, trying to quell the hysteria she could feel rising up in her at what he had done.

'Because I had you in my sights the moment you landed up at the hump, that's why. I couldn't be too sure you wouldn't turn around and make for home.'

'If only I had ! ' she choked out.

'Wouldn't have made any difference,' Carl said quietly, unperturbed by her obvious distress. 'The track would have been a quagmire before you'd done much more than a mile. It would only have meant that I had to go and pick you up.'

'I must say you had all the luck on your side,' she observed bitterly. 'If Michael had been in the office he would have come with me. What exactly did you plan to do about that?'

'But he wasn't, was he?' he answered crisply, showing that he had not liked even the implication that Michael would have accompanied her. 'You don't think I left such a possibility out of my reckoning, do you? Jack Oates was due at Bathurst, wasn't he?' he asked softly. 'And as he has no liking for driving in bad light, it was obvious he would take his son along with him. In any case, I made certain he went with him. A friend of mine gave him an errand or two to do.'

Teresa had run out of questions after this last disclosure, and stared dully at the now low fire. The sound of the rain still pelting down outside seeped

through her and added to her depression. She had really had enough, and she desperately wanted to be alone to think things out. It was one thing to know that she was going to marry Carl, quite another to realise that she was being forced to marry him whether she liked it or not. She supposed she ought to feel proud that he had taken the initiative and given her no option, but there was so much more to it than that.

'I think it's time you turned in,' Carl remarked abruptly. 'You'll see things in a better light tomorrow. It's our future I'm fighting for, remember.'

Teresa did not answer, but continued to gaze into the fire, her tiredness patently obvious by the droop of her slim shoulders. 'It's going to be all right, honey,' he said gently. 'Come on, a good night's sleep is what you need. We'll talk it out tomorrow.'

He made a move towards her, and Teresa, terrified that he would try and take her in his arms, made an abrupt, almost shuddering movement and stood up. 'Perhaps you're right,' she said listlessly. 'I am tired.'

Carl's voice, with a hint of impatience in it, told her he had not missed her reluctance to accept comfort from him. 'I'll kip down on the couch,' he said meaningly.

Teresa nodded dully, and walked towards the door. As she reached it, Carl asked coolly, 'Would it upset your maidenly virtue if I brought you a cup of tea in the morning?'

She did look at him then, and all her unhappiness showed in her eyes as she shrugged uncaringly. 'I

don't suppose it would make any difference if I said yes, would it?' she answered flatly.

Her reward came with the blaze in his eyes at this forthright answer, and she walked out of the room with her head held high.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AFTER a quick shower, Teresa thankfully shut herself in her room and prepared for bed. The next item on the agenda was, of course, a nightdress, and she delved once again into the trunk which was turning out to be a veritable treasure chest as far as providing her with such necessary items as clothing of one sort or another. As she had not brought her handbag with her, deeming it unnecessary luggage when she had left the chalet, she did not possess a comb or a hairbrush, and breathed a sigh of satisfaction as she came across the pearl-backed toilet set she had bought for use on her honeymoon.

There were other things there, of course, bought for the same purpose, and Teresa knew no regret as she unfolded the tissue paper that protected her trousseau and chose a flimsy nightdress. There was nothing else she could use in any case; all the joy she had felt when she had packed the trousseau was gone, leaving not even a pang at its absence. Events had moved a little too fast for her to assimilate them, and all she could think of at that time was sleep.

The bed was as comfortable as it had looked, and as her head touched the downy pillows Teresa ought to have fallen fast asleep. But she found herself wide awake, too tense for sleep, and longed to bury her head in the pillows and release some of the tension out of her by giving way to tears, but she stoutly re-

fused to allow herself this luxury. Tears wouldn't help, and she had a vague idea that once she started to cry it would be a long time before she stopped.

Nothing, she told herself, was hopeless, there had to be a way out somewhere, and if she put her mind to it no doubt she would come up with a solution. She thought of Carl and what he had said about fighting for their future; well, she was fighting for their future too, only he wouldn't see it that way. His solution of going up north loomed more as a threat than a promise to her now, for she would be entirely cut off from even the few people she knew, and she wondered if Carl had given that much thought. But then he wouldn't, she thought miserably, he was only concerned about blotting out all traces of the Raffertys, past and present.

She turned restlessly on to her side; it was still hard for her to believe that he could be quite so ruthless, and yet he had been, leaving her no illusions as to why he had put her in such a predicament. These thoughts led to others, and her misery increased when she thought of the reaction her enforced stay at the cabin would induce from Uncle Patrick. Carl had not left her much pride, had he? It didn't matter to him that everyone would now be of the opinion that he had had to marry her. He was so intent on getting his own way that he had lost sight of this small but devastatingly important fact. In the circumstances, it was perhaps as well that they were going up north!

Teresa very much doubted if her uncle would even speak to her afterwards ... her eyes widened. Or would he? She sat up suddenly as the idea took

hold of her. She would tell him the whole story! Now why hadn't she thought of that before? He would believe it, of course I And what was more, he would have a whale of a time recounting the story all over town!

For once, she thought sardonically, the feud was going to help her. It owed her that much at least. Her happy thoughts roamed on and in her mind's eye she actually saw her uncle regaling the latest dastardly act perpetrated by an Elton.

Her brow creased. Would Carl be prosecuted for abduction? If it were left to her uncle, he might very well bring charges against him, and she didn't want that at any cost. She sighed; it had been such a good idea too. No, there had to be another way, and her brow creased still further as she concentrated on the problem, then brightened again. All she had to do was get to her uncle first; tell him to say nothing until she had had a chance to explain things to him. She wasn't sure quite how she was going to prevent him from making a song and dance about it, but she was certain she could come up with a plausible enough explanation, given time.

These thoughts acted like a balm on her lacerated feelings, and within minutes she was asleep.

The rattle of a teacup placed on the bedside cabinet awoke Teresa the following morning, and as she had been dreaming she was in her old home, the familiar sound told her it was either a Saturday or a Sunday, for those were the days her mother would bring her a cup of tea in bed. Partially opening one eye, she stretched luxuriously.

'Don't do that!' said Carl warningly. 'Or I shall be forced to abandon a few of my good intentions.'

The words brought Teresa out of the dream state with a vengeance, and as she jerked awake, the knowledge of where she was and why she was there broke over her consciousness, and she sat up hurriedly, gathering the sheet close to her partially bared shoulders.

'And don't overdo it either,' he threatened, 'or you just might make me mad enough to teach you a lesson!'

Teresa looked at him, trying to gauge his mood. He had not been joking, she saw, for there was a tenseness about him that made her hold back any remark calculated to infuriate him. He was, it appeared, still smarting about what she had said when she left him the previous evening. Her eyes surreptitiously studied him. He had dressed that morning in a pale blue silk shirt and tan slacks, and was freshly shaven, for she caught the scent of his after-shave. His eyes met hers, and she looked away quickly and picked up her tea, murmuring, 'Thank you.'

Carl watched her for a moment or so and it appeared to Teresa that he had been half-hoping for a showdown then and there, and was a little put out because she refused to oblige him.

'Is it still raining?' she asked conversationally.

He nodded abruptly, then as if his humour had been restored, grinned at her. 'It's not let up all night,' he told her, almost triumphantly she thought.

Teresa did not answer, but went on sipping her

tea. When she had finished he collected the empty cup and saucer, and to her relief walked to the door. 'Bathroom's free when you're ready,' he remarked airily, 'and breakfast in half an hour. So don't go back to sleep again, will you?'

Her eyes lingered on the closed door for a few minutes after he had gone. He had said that much as a married man might have done, she thought scathingly, as if it were all over bar the shouting. But it wasn't! It was only the beginning, as Carl was so fond of telling her, only not the beginning he had in mind! He didn't know it, but he had just lit a bonfire on the feud he'd hoped to bury!

On these rallying thoughts she leapt out of bed, and when she had showered and dressed she opened the window shutters and stood gazing out. There was a half-formulated plan in her mind to get away from the cabin before the arrival of her uncle. If only she could get back to the chalet under her own steam all Carl's well-laid schemes would come to nothing, for she could deny she had ever been here, and her uncle would back her up in this if she told him to. It all depended, Teresa thought, on the state of the van and whether it was still serviceable.

One look, however, sent her new-found spirits plunging to zero. It might have been better had her room not given such a clear view of the situation, for she could plainly see the van, now firmly embedded in thick swirling mud, and what had been a small stream had now swollen to a fast-moving river. Of the small wooden bridge she had crossed over there was no sign at all, and was presumably under a foot or so of water, probably more. Carl had chosen his time and territory well, she thought

bitterly—that was plan number one, well and *truly* abandoned!

'Admiring the landscape?' commented Carl, in the sort of voice that suggested he had a fair idea of what had been in her mind, and he confirmed it by joining her at the window and staring out at the van. 'Looks a write-off to me,' he said smoothly. 'I'll compensate Rafferty for it, of course.'

'Of course,' echoed Teresa with a glint in her eye. Breakfast, surprisingly enough, was a pleasant meal. Carl correctly assessed Teresa's mood and set out to charm her into a sweeter disposition, and she responded favourably. She had by now convinced herself that all would be well and Carl's master plan just wasn't going to work, and she even felt a little sorry that she couldn't be more co-operative in this matter, but knew she could rely on her uncle to keep the flag flying.

When Carl produced what he called a 'games chest' a little later on, she brightened still further, for there had still been a lingering worry at the back of her mind as to how they were going to fill the day, and she eagerly agreed to settle down to a game of cards.

The day passed pleasantly without any mention of the previous day's happenings, and Teresa began to be lulled into a sense of quiet content. She would forget the troubles that beset them and enjoy what little time she would have in Carl's company. However, she found this was easier said than done, for there were times when she would find his eyes on her, and the look in them made her hastily revise her earlier ruminations, and she had to think of something to say to ease the situation. She asked

him about the station he had bought up north.

Soon he was telling her of the size of the ranch and how he would lick it into shape, and Teresa felt a traitor as she listened, saying nothing that could be held against her later. After a while she noticed that Sunset Ridge was continually held up as an example of what he hoped to make Targee, as the station was called, into. 'I couldn't hope to produce another Sunset Ridge,' Carl commented ruefully, 'but it will be a fine place when I've finished with it.'

Teresa was sure it would be and felt a little sorry that she wouldn't be seeing it, and rather wished she hadn't brought the subject up.

The rain stopped just after lunch the following day, and it took a little while for Teresa to realise it. They were playing a kind of rummy to ascertain who would do the washing up, and she was too immersed in the game to notice how quiet everything had gone. Carl, even though he must have known the deluge had stopped, did not enlighten her.

Gradually the peace outside seeped through Teresa's consciousness and she frowned as if trying to pinpoint its sources, and Carl, with a movement that showed his reluctance, got up and opened the window shutters.

'It's over,' she said in a hushed voice, unknowingly letting the relief creep into her voice.

'I'd say it was the start,' replied Carl, giving her an interrogating look as if he sensed her feelings. 'I'll give Rafferty four hours,' he said dryly, and this time the amusement was back in his voice.

Teresa glanced at her watch; that would make it

six o'clock before they could leave the cabin! It would seem more like eight hours! To be so near the end of her ordeal, and yet so far from accomplishing her goal, was a point she hadn't taken into consideration. She had somehow thought that once the rain eased up Uncle Patrick would have been right on the spot, although she couldn't imagine what he would do for transport. He would probably ask Michael or his father to bring him out there. Preferably Mr Oates, she thought worriedly, as Michael's appearance would most certainly bring out the worst in Carl ... And how was Carl going to get back? He had no transport there. She spoke her thoughts. 'How will you get back?' she asked.

Carl grinned at her. 'Jan, my foreman, will be on the spot as soon as possible,' he answered, added meditatively, 'Very likely he'll bring your uncle along with him.'

This did not suit Teresa one little bit, for she had hoped to keep the two sides apart until she had had a little talk with her uncle. The best she could hope for now was to be the first to get to him when they did eventually arrive.

'Shall we resume the game?' asked Carl dryly. 'Although I'm afraid you're going to be washing the dishes again!' he added.

Teresa gave him an indignant look. 'I haven't lost yet,' she retorted quickly.

'Haven't you?' he answered in a soft voice that showed her he was not referring to the game.

She decided to ignore this taunt, and picked up her cards with a determined air.

Although she tried not to show it, she couldn't

help taking quick peeps at her watch as the hours ticked slowly away, and Carl, missing nothing as usual, observed casually, 'It might take a little longer.' His eyes met her startled ones. 'For them to get here, I mean. It rather depends on how soon that stream outside resumes its normal proportions.'

Teresa didn't quite get the connection at first, and her eyes said so. 'The bridge,' he explained patiently. 'It's submerged, in case you hadn't noticed.'

Just another little point *she* hadn't taken into consideration, she thought miserably, as she nodded her understanding of this and tried to keep her depression out of her eyes.

The four hours passed, and another half an hour, before the welcoming sound of a motor engine sounded in the distance. Teresa staring out at the direction from where she could hear the vehicle approaching, found her hands clenching into small fists. Although she thought she had relaxed during the card sessions with Carl, she must have been keying herself up to this point in time and was now extremely tense. She *had* to get to her uncle first, and woe betide Carl if he tried to stop her

With a sense of disappointment she watched the car come into view, for it was obviously not Jack Oates' or Michael's, but one she had not seen before. The sleek vehicle that was slowly but surely making its way along the thick muddied track could only belong to Carl, and ignoring Carl's cool, 'What's the hurry? They'll have to stay put for a while yet,' she made her way to the front door and stood waiting until the car drew to a sliding halt next to the stream opposite them.

The first one out of the car was not unnaturally her uncle Patrick, who shouted across in a warring voice, 'Where is he? Come on out, Elton!' and seeming to notice Teresa standing there for the first time, shouted, 'Now don't worry, girl, I'll see he does right by you.'

Teresa stared at him in disbelief—if he meant what she thought he meant, he wasn't proving at all co-operative. 'Stop shouting, Uncle Patrick,' she said furiously. 'Do you want the whole town to hear you? We're talking this over in a civilised manner or not at all.'

Carl chose that moment to join her, and to her fury he slid an arm around her waist in an exceedingly possessive manner calculated to infuriate the already fuming man on the other side of the stream.

'Yell marry her, do you hear, Elton? Jist try and wriggle out, that's all. I'll have you up afore the beak, that I will!' shouted Patrick, and emphasised

his feelings by shaking his fist in the air and jumping up and down in his righteous rage.

Teresa could have murdered him. A fine help he was turning out to be! He was making the whole situation turn into something of a farce, and a very bad one at that, considering the role he had elected her to play, well, she wasn't in the mood for play-acting! 'Stop it, do you hear!' she shouted at him, and glared at Carl, who just stood there thoroughly enjoying the play, as bad as it was!

Her look sent him reluctantly into action, and still keeping a firm hold on Teresa's waist, he drawled, 'You have my word on it. Now be a good fellow and wait until we can work out the details.'

His words had an instant calming effect on her

uncle, and muttering something under his breath Patrick got back into the car, and Carl's foreman got out. Almost as if he had been primed to stay out of the way until her uncle had had his say, thought Teresa furiously, and her fury mounted as the man called across to Carl. 'I'd say in about another hour, boss,' he said, looking at the bridge that was just showing signs of emerging from the stream.

The thought of waiting another hour in those circumstances was more than Teresa was prepared to take, and before Carl had guessed her intention she had slipped from his hold and made for the bridge, one thought only in her mind; she had to make her uncle see sense, and she wasn't going to do it on the other side of the stream from him.

She heard Carl take off after her, but she had a running start on him. Her determination not to be coerced into marrying him gave her feet wings, and she had covered the short distance to the bridge in a matter of seconds. She didn't stop to think that the water might be deep in places, she only knew she had to get across that bridge, and she could plainly see the submerged portion of the bridge in the swirling water. Utterly disregarding Carl's shout, she flung herself on to the bridge.

As her feet touched the floor of the bridge, she let out a sigh of relief. Only a little way now. Carl shouted again. 'Keep to the side, Teresa!'

As if she could tell which was the side! Her feet were firmly on the bridge, although admittedly it appeared to be getting deeper in the section she was now passing, for the water was gradually creeping to her waist. Then it happened. What one

moment had been firm wood under her feet suddenly became a slimy morass; her feet shot out from under her, and she fell heavily against one of the wood stanchions, hitting her head hard against it as she tried to gain her balance.

When Teresa next opened her eyes, she blinked, and closed them again quickly. She was having hallucinations, surely? She knew this room well. She was not likely to forget such a beautiful room with its plush furnishings. Her eyes opened cautiously again, and this time focused on the bed that she was lying in, with fine linen sheets and silk woven counterpane. So it was true 1 She was at Sunset Ridge!

Sitting up slowly, she winced as a slight pain shot through her forehead, and put an exploratory hand on the area concerned. A wide piece of sticking plaster covered what must have been a cut of some sort, and Teresa remembered her fall on the bridge, but after that, nothing. So she had been unconscious when she was brought to Sunset Ridge. Her lower lip caught in her even teeth; it looked very much as if her desperate bid to gain her uncle's help had gone sadly awry. Carl must have been pretty sure of his ground if he had had her brought there.

She lay back on the pillows again. What a pity she hadn't lost her memory again—at least she would have gained some respite that way. Carl couldn't go ahead with the wedding if the bride didn't know him! Her thoughts meandered on; why didn't these things happen when you needed them to? But she could make it happen! Her

eyes took on a brighter hue. All she had to do was pretend she didn't know him again, and he would have to send her back to her uncle!

She smiled; it was simple really. She would marry Carl only if they lived at Sunset Ridge, proving once and for all that the feud was over. If he agreed to that then Teresa didn't really care where they lived, be it north or south, as long as they were together, and Carl wouldn't be the only one who would have to bury the hatchet; Uncle Patrick must toe the line too she told herself firmly. There were to be no half-measures. It wasn't too much to ask, surely?

The door of the bedroom opened a little way and Teresa stared at the bright sunlight now streaming through the frilled organdie curtains, unaware of Carl's scrutiny, her thoughts bringing a frown to her expression, so that when she did become aware of his presence it was not hard to feign surprise at the sight of him. He walked towards her with a kind of hesitancy that told her he was unsure of how to approach her, and of whether she knew him or not.

'How are you feeling?' he asked carefully.

Teresa was glad to be able to look away from his searching eyes, and put a hand to her head. 'Rather delicate,' she replied non-committally.

He nodded. 'Not surprising, considering the wallop you took,' he said conversationally. 'It was a very stupid thing to do, and a good job I was close behind you.'

Teresa did not answer, she dared not. She wasn't supposed to know what they were talking about, was she?

'I suppose you remember nothing?' he asked

casually, and sat down on the bed beside her.

She moved back a little way from him, remembering it was what would be expected of her, and he ought to have realised that, she thought crossly. Even if he had been a doctor he wouldn't have sat quite so close as that, particularly as she was in her nightdress. She gave a quick glance to the size of the gown she wore. Well, not her nightdress—Mrs Ray's, more likely! Coming away from these diverting thoughts, she realised that Carl was still awaiting an answer from her. She shook her head, and added a frown for good measure, wincing as the plaster pulled on her forehead at the effort.

'Oh, my 1' sighed Carl deeply. 'It's not what might be called an envious situation for us to be in on our honeymoon.'

Teresa was brought out of her lost-memory role with a jerk, and sat up suddenly and stared at him with wide eyes. 'Hon-honeymoon?' she got out in a strangled voice, and for a moment she wondered whether she really had lost her memory.

'It was such a lovely ceremony, too,' sighed Carl in a rueful voice that added to her confusion, and she continued to stare at him while her mind went over previous events. She couldn't have married him! How could she repeat her vows if she was unconscious?

It was as well for Teresa's peace of mind that she caught a wicked imp of amusement lurking at the back of his eyes. So that was it! He was trying shock tactics on her.

'I'm sorry,' she murmured in a timid voice, hastily lowering her lashes to prevent him spotting the

glint in her eyes. 'It must be awful for you. Y-you'll just have to give me time, won't you?'

'I'll give you a damn good thrashing, my girl, if you keep this up much longer!' he threatened.

Teresa hadn't given up yet; he couldn't be absolutely certain that she did know him. 'I don't think I like you!' she said indignantly. 'Go away and bully someone else.'

She heard the quick intake of breath and half expected to be given the threatened walloping then and there, but he wasn't through yet either. 'I must say I didn't expect to become a wife-beater so early in our marriage, but it rather looks as if I've no option. Come here!' he commanded, and propelled her roughly into his arms.

She wasn't too sure how the punishment was going to be administered, and when she realised the form it was going to take, she became panic-stricken, for his lips roamed her forehead and his hands caressed her bare shoulders, sending shivers of anticipation through her. 'I'm not your wife,' she cried frantically, 'stop it, Carl!'

He released her immediately, and holding her away from him he studied her through narrowed eyes. 'So,' he said softly, 'we have the truth at last, do we?' and stopped her indignant protest by sealing her lips firmly with his.

'Give in?' he whispered a short while later, and a thoroughly weak Teresa could only nod her head and rest it on his shoulder. What did it matter, she thought, if it wasn't quite what she had wanted? He loved her and she loved him, and everything else paled into insignificance.

'The wedding's at two-thirty,' he announced calmly, grinning at Teresa's start. 'We've just made it,' he said, giving her a look that turned her heart over, 'I didn't have to cancel it after all.'

Woman-like, Teresa's thoughts turned to her trousseau. Her things were in the trunk, but 'My dress?' she asked.

Carl got up and walked to the wardrobe and flung open the doors for her to see the contents. 'Right where you left it, honey. It's been waiting for you,' he said airily, and added on a slightly thickened note, 'as I have.'

Her breath caught in her throat. 'Where are we going afterwards?' she asked quickly, in an effort to stem the impulse to hold her arms out to him. He was safer where he was—across the room from her.

His brow lifted in query. 'Could you stand the cabin again for maybe a week, or longer?'

He answer was in her eyes, and he had covered the distance between them in a second.

'Will you mind,' she murmured later, 'leaving here, I mean?'

Kissing her hair lightly, he replied, 'I thought we'd gone into all that,' then pulled her closer. 'I don't want you hurt, sweetie. I can only protect you by taking you away.'

Teresa frowned and pulled herself away from him so that she could see his face. 'Why should anyone want to hurt me?' she asked in genuine puzzlement, although a little ray of sunshine was creeping through her consciousness.

Carl's rueful eyes met hers. 'Isobel, for one,' he said slowly.

Teresa shook her head slowly as if trying to assimilate this disclosure. And she had thought ... She gave him an indignant look. 'You mean,' she said incredulously, 'that that's the reason you're insisting we go up north?'

Carl traced a loving finger down her cheek and softly touched her full lips. 'Believe me, sweetheart, it's for the best. They'd never let you live down the Rafferty connection. Isobel is only one of them. The rest will follow her lead, and the ladies of high society in these parts are a close-knit community. They have coffee mornings, tea parties—you know the sort of thing I mean. Oh, sure,' he said bitterly, 'you'll be asked to a few occasions at the start, and they'll make the right noises from curiosity if nothing else, but you'll soon find yourself excluded from everything, and I won't,' he added fiercely, 'have you hurt, or made to feel a social outcast, for that's what they'll do to you, and I won't always be around to see fair play.'

For a while Teresa found it impossible to say anything. How she had misjudged him! She buried her face in his chest. 'Oh, my love,' she whispered, the tears welling up in her eyes. 'As if I cared one iota about that sort of thing I As long as I have your love, nothing else matters, do you hear me?' she demanded, sniffing loudly in an effort to stop the tears.

Carl's arms tightened around her. 'It can be a lonely life for a woman out here, my sweet,' he said, burying his face in her neck. 'I don't think you quite realise how important these social get-togethers can become.'

'And that's what you want me to become, is it?' said Teresa in a muffled voice. 'A social butterfly?' She pushed him gently away from her and met his eyes. 'Shall I tell you what I'm going to become, Carl Elton?' she demanded in a voice that trembled a little. 'A wife and a mother. How'—her voice grew stronger—'how much time do you think I'm going to have for socialising when I want a huge family?' She sniffed. 'Well, not perhaps all that large,' she conceded, 'something on the lines of a rugby team, I thought ...' She was not allowed to finish the sentence.

A few hours later Teresa dressed for her wedding, that was to take place in the games room of Sunset Ridge. Not that it bore any resemblance to a games room by the time Mrs Ray and a few helpers had finished with it. The wood block floor had now been covered with a carpet and flowers were displayed in various fancy containers, and placed in every available space.

The guests had been cut to a minimum, and only very close friends of Carl's had been asked. Isobel and her parents, of course, had been given an invitation, but Isobel had sent a politely worded note to the effect that she was indisposed, but that her parents would attend. Teresa could find it in her heart to feel sorry for her, for had it been the other way round, she knew how she would have felt.

Adjusting the lace round her wrist, Teresa waited while Mrs Ray fussed round the hem of her dress to make certain it hung right. Her offer of help had come as a pleasant surprise to Teresa, who had

wondered at first whether she was working under orders from Carl, but she had given such unstinting attention to even the smallest detail that Teresa had come to the conclusion that it was not enforced labour, and this puzzled her a little, for Mrs Ray had been with the Eltons for years, so long in fact that she could almost be identified as one of the family. Would she mind a Rafferty ruling Sunset Ridge? Teresa wondered. Not that one would think so by the way she was fussing round her. It would certainly appear that that piece of mischief-making was the sole product of Isobel's feverish thinking. It certainly was not Carl's, for he had looked astounded when Teresa confessed the reason why she had repeatedly refused to marry him.

Teresa's thoughts then went to her uncle, and she wondered whether he would give her away, and if so what sort of a mood he would be in. If he didn't behave himself, she thought as she adjusted the veil over her bright hair, she would read him the riot act, and very likely bang his head hard against the nearest object!

Her expression was so fierce that it caused Mrs Ray to give her an anxious glance and ask, 'Is everything all right, dear? You're not having an attack of nerves, are you?'

Teresa smiled. 'No, I'm quite all right, thank you, Mrs Ray, and thank you for the help you've given me. It's very sweet of you ...' She hesitated, not quite knowing how to put what she was thinking into words, and then went on slowly, 'I hope I don't turn out to be a disappointment to everyone. I know I'm considered an outsider,' she said quietly.

Mrs Ray's homely face broke into a beaming smile. 'That makes two of us,' she said. 'We'll keep the old home fires burning, you'll *see* if we don't,' she added kindly.

Teresa could have hugged her. It wasn't quite what she meant, but she had a feeling that Mrs Ray had known exactly what she was getting at, and had vanquished her fears the only way she knew how.

Her day, Teresa felt, would be made if Uncle Patrick would toe the line. She asked for nothing more, and her eyes swept over the small gathering of guests for some sign of her uncle as she made her way through the hall towards the games room. **If** he were there, surely he would be waiting outside the room to lead her down the aisle? Her uncle, however, was not there, but Doctor Turnbull was, dressed resplendently in top hat and tails, and his eyes twinkled as he offered her his arm. Teresa, taking it, tried not to show her disappointment at not seeing her uncle.

'Patrick's been held up,' explained the doctor, who saw through her bright smile. 'I'm deputising for him, with your consent, of course,' and at her quick nod he went on. 'I'm sure he'll explain when he gets here,' he added kindly. 'Now, are you ready?'

Teresa ought to have thought of nothing but the tall fair man, dressed immaculately in a dark pin-stripe, who stood waiting for her at the end of the room, and who turned as she neared him, his eyes telling her he loved her. But a touch of sorrow had intruded where none should be, for she was convinced that her uncle had boycotted the ceremony, and she had so much wanted him to be there.

Her quietness did not go unnoticed by Carl, who drew her aside the first moment he could after they had received the congratulations of all present. 'What is it, my sweet?' he asked anxiously. 'Your head's not aching, is it?'

Teresa shook her head, and in spite of her determination to appear gay she found to her horror that tears were welling up in her eyes. 'Uncle Patrick,' she said in a low voice. 'He didn't come, did he?'

Carl placed an arm round her waist and pulled her close to him. 'You're really fond of that old scallywag, aren't you?' he asked softly. 'Well, you can put your mind at rest. In a way, it's my fault.' He added quickly, seeing the look of reproach this brought from her, 'No, we haven't quarrelled again. In fact I think we'll get a lot more co-operation from him in future.'

Teresa had no time to ask him what he meant, for at that moment in walked the man himself; although Teresa had to look twice to confirm that it was Uncle Patrick, for he wore top hat and tails, and bright polished shoes. Her wondering eyes saw him swagger, she couldn't put it any other way, down the room towards them, and Carl gave her a slight squeeze as he called, 'Someone get Mr Rafferty a glass of champagne!'

'Whist, girl! 'Tis sorry I am to have missed your nuptials. The fool of a tailor mislaid me gear, and I wasn't turning up in anything but the best,' he said as he brushed a speck of white off his sleeve. 'Sure, I'm a man of consequence now, so I am!' He darted a quick look at Carl as if he dared to contradict him.

'Patrick,' explained Carl carefully, 'has kindly

agreed to run my transport section for me. There'll be a lot of movement from here to the northern station, and he knows those routes like the back of his hand. Means an office job, of course, but he's the right man for the job.'

'Sure, I couldn't,' boasted Uncle Patrick as he accepted the glass that had been brought to him, 'have put it better meself,' and lifted the glass up in salute to Carl and Teresa. 'To the Eltons and the Raffertys ' he said solemnly, and drank their health.

Teresa's heart was full as she stood a little apart and watched her uncle and her husband in earnest discussion on the coming project, and nearly burst as she heard her uncle say, 'So this is the games room, is it? I heard Joe Spang mention it a couple of times.' His eyes roamed the room. 'He said it was a fair size,' he commented.

Carl's eyes went to Teresa as he answered with a bland expression on his face, 'Well, I'm thinking of having it extended. We're expecting a rugby team, you know! '

Later that day, when they were finally alone, Teresa had just one little bone to pick with her beloved. 'You realise, I suppose,' she remarked with a hint of reproach in her eyes, 'that nearly everyone will be of the opinion that you had to marry me? Although,' she said airily, as she ran her fingers lightly over the firm lines of his jaw, 'I don't suppose that little fact ever entered your autocratic head.'

Carl grinned, and caught her hand to his lips. 'There isn't a single soul in this town,' he told her

wickedly, 'who doesn't know how I feel about you—
or that I was having trouble in bringing you to heel.
If anything, my sweet, you have their sympathy for
arousing the passion of such a ruthless character!