

MONKSHOOD

BY

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They loved Monkshood but hated each other!

Monkshood complicated Melanie's well-planned life. Soon to marry a London lawyer, Melanie couldn't really consider living in the Scottish Highlands house she'd inherited. But she did want to see it before deciding what to do.

Seeing Monkshood, however, meant meeting Sean Bothwell, who regarded it as his property. Though he seemed to have moral grounds for his claim, Melanie couldn't commit herself to parting with it.

Could her reluctance to give it up possibly have anything to do with her reactions to Sean?

CHAPTER ONE

It had been snowing when Melanie left Fort William, small, driving grains of white that filmed the windscreen of the car and kept the wipers at full urgency, but nothing like this. Now the flakes were large and soft and unwieldy, apparently impervious to the slowing scrape of the wipers, settling in heavy cumbersome drifts against the windscreen, almost obliterating her view.

Melanie quelled the sense of panic the situation aroused in her, comforting herself with the thought that she could not be far from her destination. After all, she had passed the sign for Loch Cairnross some time ago, and even allowing for the delay, she must have covered several miles since then. But darkness was drawing in, and although it was not late in the afternoon, Melanie found it all rather unnerving. Even so, she was loath to admit that Michael had been right when he had called her fool­ish and irresponsible driving all the way to Cairnside from London in the middle of December.

Now she peered grimly into the blizzard, trying to dis­tinguish some sign of civilization in the wilderness ahead. Surely there must be some habitation somewhere. Surely someone lived in these remote wastes, even if it was only a shepherd or a farmer. She thought of stories she had read of the Scottish Highlands; of descriptions of the lonely lives of crofters in isolated valleys between the hills, and her spirits plummeted. Hard on the heels of these thoughts came others of motorists and climbers impris­oned in their cars or in lonely hostelries and found days later dead from cold and starvation...

She heaved a deep breath. She was allowing her im­agination to get the better of her and there was absolutely no reason to suppose that she was going to be trapped in a snowdrift or anything else, and so long as the car kept moving she was perfectly safe.

Another thought struck her, causing her to slow the car almost involuntarily. Once darkness came down what was to stop her from leaving the road altogether and maybe driving into bog or marshland, or even into one of the lochs themselves? Coated with snow, how would she be able to distinguish her way?

A moment later her wheels began to spin. The slowing of the car combined with an impulsive depression of the accelerator caused by a desperate desire to reach her des­tination as soon as possible had achieved what her careful driving had avoided until now, and she realized that to continue revving her engine would simply embed the wheels deeper in the snow and slush.

Fastening the top button of her sheepskin coat closer about her throat and pulling on the fur hat which had been lying on the scat beside her since she left London the day before, she pushed open her door and emerged from the warmth and comfort of the car into the blinding chill of the blizzard. For a moment the sudden icy blast took her breath away, but then she wasted no more time trying to look about her when it was impossible to see more than a few yards and bent instead to the rear wheels of the car. As she had already suspected, the wheels were caked with snow and had no grip against an already slippery surface. Sighing, she straightened and wiped tendrils of hair back from her forehead, wet now in the driving flakes of snow that melted against the warmth of her skin. What was she to do? She had no real idea where she was, never having visited Scotland before, never mind this remote area of

the Highlands, and being alone seemed infinitely worse than having someone with whom she could have com­miserated.

Deciding she might as well keep dry while she con­sidered her desperate position, she climbed back into the car again and consulted her watch. It was only a little after three-thirty, but already it seemed like early evening in this wintry wasteland. She glanced about her, shiver­ing, and her eyes alighted on her suitcases in the back of the car. Inside these were her clothes, and an idea oc­curred to her. If she could take out some garment, some old garment, and spread it under the rear wheels of the car, she might just succeed in getting the vehicle moving again, and then she would have to try and keep moving until she reached some kind of habitation.

Turning, she knelt on the seat and extracting her keys from her handbag she used them to open one of the cases. As she surveyed the mass of woollens and lingerie that confronted her, she wondered how she could use any of these things for such a purpose, knowing that whatever she did use would have to be written off as she would be unable to stop and pick it up again. She bit her lip. She was not thinking constructively. What use would any of these clothes be to her if she froze to death instead?

With determination, she drew out two sweaters, made of wool, which she thought might serve the purpose. Then she climbed out of the car again and bent to push the woollens hard against the rear tyres. The wind whistled through the pines at the side of the road and the biting particles of snow stung her checks. She was trying desperately to remain calm when everything around her seemed determined to arouse a sense of panic inside her, and she was concentrating so hard on what she was doing that she did not see the glimmer of headlamps through

the gloom or distinguish the sound of a vehicle's engine above the roaring of the wind.

Awareness came swiftly, and she had only just enough time to get out of the way as a huge Range-Rover ground to a halt beside her on the narrow track, showering her with slush. Shivering and breathless, as much with shock as with cold, Melanie saw a man climb out of the driving seat and stride heavily round the bonnet of the vehicle to her side. It was impossible to make out his features as she blinked rapidly in the blinding blizzard, but she could see that he was reasonably tall and broad and male and relief overwhelmed all other emotions.

She was about to make some thankful comment about his timely arrival, when he halted before her and snapped: 'Do you want to get yourself killed?' in a harsh, angry tone.

Melanie stared at him helplessly, shading her eyes with a mittened hand. 'I beg your pardon—' she began.

'Oh, English!' he muttered impatiently, glancing down at the tyres of her car and their woollen accoutrements. 'Exactly what are you trying to do?'

He had only a faint accent, but he was unmistakably Celtic in the brusqueness of his manner, and as her eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom she could see that his hair was thick and very black against the whiteness of the snow.

'My car is stuck, as you can see,' Melanie explained now, refusing to allow his manner to annoy her.

The man surveyed the car with some derision. 'It isn't actually the kind of vehicle used to this kind of terrain, is it?' he commented dryly.

Melanie kept her temper with difficulty. 'No,' she agreed carefully. 'I will admit it's used to more - well - civilized routes!'

The man allowed a faint smile to lift the comers of his mouth. 'Undoubtedly. Exactly where are you making for?\*

'Cairnside. Am I far from there?'

'As the crow flies, no. Just a couple of miles, that's all. The way you're going you should reach there some time tomorrow.'

Melanie compressed her lips. 'What do you mean?' she snapped.

He shrugged. 'What do you think I mean?'

'I'm going in the wrong direction.'

'Exactly.' He bent and tugged at the sweaters she had pushed under her wheels. 'You'd better put these away. I somehow don't think they're going to be of much use.'

'What do you mean?' Melanie was past caring about being pleasant now. 'Where have I gone wrong?'

He smiled mockingly. 'Maybe you know the answer to that better than I do. But you left the road to Cairnside almost half a mile back.'

'What?' Melanie was horrified.

'I'm afraid so.' He shrugged and in less sardonic tones added: 'It's easily done in these conditions. I saw your tracks and followed them. If you'd continued on in a straight line you would most probably have ended up in Loch Cairnross!'

'What?'

Melanie was aghast, and her legs felt quite weak when she realized how close she had come to disaster. Leaning against the bonnet of her car for support, she said: 'I - I suppose I ought to thank you.'

He shook his dark head. 'That's not necessary. I'd have done the same for anyone. However, you'll have to leave your car here tonight. I don't intend to try towing it back in this. If you'd like to put your luggage in the Rover I'll

drive you to the hotel. You can arrange about your car when the weather breaks.'

Melanie hesitated. 'That - that's very kind of you. But I don't even know your name.'

He frowned and brushed past her to open her rear door and take out her suitcases. He slammed the opened suit­case shut with complete disregard for its contents and then turning said: 'I don't consider this either the time or the place for formalities, however, if it means anything to you you can call me Bothwell!'

'Bothwell!' Melanie stared at him incredulously. It seemed such an appropriate name somehow. 'I -er - I'm Melanie Stewart!'

Bothwell didn't seem to hear her, or if he did he con­sidered it of no import, and with a shrug Melanie stepped aside as he carried her cases to the Rover.

'You'd better get inside,' he advised brusquely, 'before you freeze to death! I'll lock up your car. Are the keys inside?'

Melanie nodded and climbed obediently into the ve­hicle. It was so much warmer inside out of the driving sleet and she began to realize exactly how cold she had become almost without being aware of it. Her fingers and toes were numb and a trickle of water was making its way down her neck, past her collar, to the warmth of her spine.

Bothwell closed her car and came towards the Range- Rover tossing her keys in a gloved hand. He aimed a kick at each of his tyres with a booted foot as though to check their serviceability before getting into the front of the vehicle beside her. Then he switched on the interior light and regarded her clearly for the first time without the protective shield of snowflakes.

Melanie for her part found his scrutiny rather dis­turbing, and she was annoyed to find the hot colour run­ning up her throat to her face. Certainly he seemed to find her appearance interesting, but she refused to return that insolent appraisal, deciding she did not care for such harshly carved features. He was by no means handsome; indeed, she was sure his nose had been broken at some tune, and his eyes were too deeply set above high cheek­bones, and yet she could not deny that some women might find the sensuality of his mouth and the pale inten­sity of his eyes below dark brows attractive. She already knew he was about five feet ten inches tall, only three inches taller than herself, and his frame was broad and muscular, but it was his undoubted masculinity that she found the most provoking. He was, she decided, a typical example of the kind of man who used to terrorize the Borders in the days when England and Scotland were ruled by different queens, and when that other Bothwell held sway over thousands of his countrymen.

So absorbed was she with her thoughts that when he spoke she started. 'Exactly what is a girl like yourself doing out here in the depths of winter?'

Melanie bit her lip. The outspokenness of his question was in keeping with his manner, she thought, and she was tempted to tell him to mind his own business. Only the realization that he was the only person capable of re­turning her to civilization caused her to have second thoughts. To some extent he was an unknown quantity so far as she was concerned, and he was most definitely not the kind of man she was used to. She thought he was primitive and uncouth, and she resented his assumption that because he was helping her he should be privy to her private affairs almost as much as having to accept his assistance in the first place.

Now she said: 'I'm going to the Black Bull at Cairnside.'

Bothwell raised his dark eyebrows. 'Indeed? That's a strange place to be going at this time of year. There are no skiing facilities near Loch Cairnross, and we don't go in for entertaining much.'

Melanie ran her tongue over her dry lips. 'That's quite all right, Mr. Bothwell. I don't expect to be enter­tained.'

His eyes narrowed and then with a shrug he turned and flicking off the interior light started the engine. He swung the vehicle round in a body-shaking curve and started back the way they had come. The Range- Rover covered the ground powerfully, and presently they turned again and Melanie guessed they were back on the road.

The snow was not falling so heavily now and the sky had lightened considerably, illuminating the road ahead more adequately than headlights. The wind still howled around them, but at least now Melanie could see where she was going. Bothwell was, if nothing else, an expert driver, and she felt secure in this knowledge, realizing she would have had immense difficulty on this glassy surface even had she made it this far. Bothwell did not speak to her again, and she could only assume that her final com­ment had made her feelings clear to him. Whatever his reasoning, she was glad. He was altogether too disturbing when he gave her all his attention, and she deliberately directed her thoughts to Michael. She tried to imagine what he would have made of her companion, and decided he would have found his overwhelming masculinity dis­tasteful.

The road suddenly curved downwards and Melanie slid forward on her scat before she could grip its edge and propel herself back again. To either side of the road stretched forests of pines, their branches laden with snow, while above them now she could see the towering moun­tains that covered this area. She wanted to ask what mountains they were, but hesitated about breaking the silence between them, and presently the road flattened out again and she realized they were in a narrow valley.

Ahead of them lights were gleaming and she leant for­ward with undeniable excitement. As they drew nearer she saw her destination. The hotel nestled at the foot of a high mountain whose peak was shrouded in mists, and whose lower slopes were dark with pine trees that en­croached to the hotel itself. The Black Bull was small and compact and welcoming, smoke curling from several of its many chimneys and dogs to announce their arrival. Melanie lay back in her seat with some relief. She had arrived, and for the moment that was all she could cope with.

Bothwell brought the Range-Rover to a halt in front of the hotel and switching off the ignition slid out without speaking to her. Melanie gathered her gloves and hand­bag and fumbled with the door catch. But before she could open the door, he swung it open for her and then turned away into the hotel.

By the time Melanie had climbed out and closed the door, he had disappeared and she was left to enter the hotel alone. Contrarily, she missed his escort, and she ap­proached the entrance with some trepidation. What if they had no rooms? What if the hotel was closed to guests?

Inside the heavy oak door she was pleasantly surprised. Beyond a small enclosed lobby there was a small recep­tion area, carpeted and furnished with old but highly- polished furniture. There was a reception desk with a register and a bell to be used for service, and if the light­ing was shadowy, at least it was electric.

Encouraged by this evidence of comfort, Melanie ap­proached the desk and rang the bell, wondering as she did so where Bothwell had gone. There was no sign of him here and she glanced surreptitiously up the wooden-balustraded staircase to the floor above.

A door opened behind the reception desk and a young woman emerged. She was unexpected, too. Small and very blonde, with a rounded figure that was clearly out­lined beneath the close-fitting woollen dress she was wearing. She smiled politely at Melanie, and said: 'Yes? Can I help you?' in an unmistakably Scottish brogue.

Melanie smiled in return. 'Er - I realize this is rather short notice, but could you possibly put me up for a couple of nights?'

The girl showed little surprise. 'I think that could be arranged, Miss - er—?'

'Oh, Stewart, Melanie Stewart,' supplied Melanie at once. 'Oh, thank goodness! I was afraid you might be full up or not taking residential guests at the moment!'

The girl consulted the register. 'Och, at this time of the year we always have plenty of room,' she said smoothly. 'There are one or two regulars, of course, but they won't trouble you.' She looked up rather questioningly. 'For a couple of nights, you said?'

Melanie bit her lip. 'At least,' she agreed awkwardly. 'I — er -1 have business in the neighbourhood, and I'm not sure how long it will take. Tell me, is the village far?'

The girl frowned. 'It's a very small village, Miss Stewart. But such as it is - it's about half a mile down the valley.' She hesitated, obviously curious to know why Melanie should be interested in the village, but Melanie chose not to enlighten her right now. That could come later.

'My - er - car - is stranded some miles back, off the

load,' she said. 'I wondered if there was a garage.,.'

'I see.' The girl shrugged. 'The nearest garage is in Rossmore, about five miles away. You could possibly tele­phone them tomorrow if the weather improves.'

'Oh, yes! Thank you.' Melanie glanced round. 'Er-a Mr. Bothwell - gave me a lift. He came into the hotel. Do you happen to know where he is? I'd like to thank him. Oh, and my cases are in the back of his car.'

The girl hesitated and then turning went to the door which led into the room behind the desk. Opening the door, she called: 'Sean!' rather sharply, and a few moments later Bothwell himself emerged.

He had shed the heavy fur-lined jacket he had been wearing, and looked darker and more muscular than ever in tight-fitting dark trousers and a polo-necked navy sweater. Melanie felt impatient with herself for asking his whereabouts now that he was here. She thought he would more than likely imagine she was deliberately drawing attention to herself again, and she tried not to speculate on what his relationship might be with the girl behind the desk.

In consequence, she was very brief in her expressions of gratitude, and he bowed his head politely at her words. She thought he was perfectly aware of her discomfort and his face took on an expression of sardonic amusement as he said: 'It was nothing, believe me. I'm used to rescuing lambs in distress, and your predicament was not so different!'

Melanie managed a forced smile and then turned back to the girl. 'I'll just get my cases,' she said.

Bothwell came round the desk. 'I'll get them,' he said, his tone brooking no argument, and Melanie said: 'Thanks!' rather ungraciously.

The girl surveyed her curiously as Bothwell disappeared outside and Melanie moved a trifle restlessly under her regard. Heavens, she thought impatiently, what was she? An oddity, or something?

Bothwell came back a few seconds later and stood in the hall, a case in each hand. The girl handed Melanie a key and said: 'Room seven. Up the stairs and it's the third on your right.'

'Thank you.' Melanie took the key and turned to the stairs.

'The maid will be up later to make up your bed,' con­tinued the girl, casting a speculative glance in Bothwell's direction, and with a casual gesture he indicated that Melanie should precede him upstairs.

Melanie hesitated only a moment and then began *to* mount the wooden staircase. It wound round at the top and then reached a small landing with a corridor running from it. She looked along the corridor and Bothwell nodded rather impatiently.

'Number seven,' he said, nodding.

Melanie was making her way down the passage when another door opened and an elderly man emerged to stand and regard them curiously. Bothwell greeted him casually, and the old man frowned.

'Who's this, Sean?' he inquired sharply.

Bothwell stood Melanie's cases down outside her door. 'This is Miss Stewart, Alaister,' he said, flexing his shoul­der muscles. 'A fellow guest!'

'Oh, ay, is that so?' The old man eyed Melanie dourly. 'Ye didna say ye were expecting anyone.'

Melanie's eyebrows lifted, but Bothwell merely shrugged. 'We didn't know we were,' he observed dryly. 'Are you away for your tea?'

The old man stomped off towards the stairs. 'Oh, ay, ay,' he said mutteringly, and with a faint smile Bothwell turned back to Melanie.

'Well,' he said, 'can you manage from here?'

Melanie fumbled with her keys and he bent past her and pushed open her bedroom door. 'It's not locked,' he said, unnecessarily. 'We don't go in much for security here, I'm afraid.'

Melanie compressed her lips and stepped into the room as he switched on the lamps. It was a very attractive room, she had to admit, with colourfully printed curtains and a fringed bedspread. The furniture was light oak, and as downstairs old but mellowed with years of polishing. Bothwell drew the curtains and turned to face her and she moved quickly, bringing her cases inside the door to avoid that brilliant gaze.

'There are no private bathrooms, I'm afraid,' he went on, \*but there are two at the end of the corridor and if you're a late sleeper you should find no difficulty.'

There was sarcasm in his tones again and Melanie reac­ted to it. 'Why should you imagine I'm a late sleeper!' she inquired coldly.

He shrugged. 'Town-dwellers are not known for their early morning fatigues,' he remarked mockingly.

You're sure I am a town-dweller.'

'Undoubtedly.' He walked past her to the door, with­out waiting for any retaliatory comment. 'Dinner is at six- thirty. It's early, I know, but the cook likes to get away home soon after nine.'

Melanie clenched her fists. You seem to know a lot about it, Air. Bothwell!'

'I should do. I run the place,' he replied smoothly, and went out, closing the door behind him.

Melanie stared after him in astonishment. He *ran* the place! She shook her head helplessly. So that was why that old man had commented upon the suddenness of her arrival to Bothwell. She had thought at first he must be a guest here, too. And that also explained why he had been in the room behind the reception desk. As for the blonde girl, she might conceivably be his wife. There couldn't be much enjoyment for anyone so young living out here in the wilds of the Highlands without some definite reason for staying.

Melanie shrugged. It was not important. What was im­portant was why she was here, and tomorrow she would have to make some inquiries about Monkshood.

As she unpacked her night things and a dress to wear for dinner that evening, she wondered whether she ought to give Michael a ring. It would at least ease his mind to know that she had arrived safely, and she did owe him that much consideration. After all, he had not wanted her to come all this way without him, and it had been impos­sible for him to get away at this particular time with several important cases in the offing. He had begged her to wait until he was free to accompany her, but just for once Melanie had wanted to get away on her own. Maybe it was the knowledge that they were getting married in March which made her eager for this last spurt of inde­pendence, or maybe it was simply that excitement at in­heriting a house like Monkshood had driven all other thoughts out of her mind.

CHAPTER TWO

Melanie awoke the next morning with a feeling of ex­pectancy. There was something entirely satisfying about being away on her own with no one to consider but her­self, and if this feeling of satisfaction was vaguely tinged with guilt she thrust such thoughts aside. After all, surely she had the right to show independence sometimes. Michael was always too willing to take her burdens from her and make her life as smooth and easy as possible, and occasionally she had wished that he would just leave her alone to make her own way, mistakes or otherwise. Maybe his training as a solicitor accounted for that air of officialdom that now and then intruded into his private life. At any rate, just for once Melanie was appreciating the freedom of being without his solicitude, and she wriggled her toes under the warm covers with contented abandon.

A glance at her watch told her it was a little after eight and she hastily slid out of the warm bed, shivering as she made her way to the windows. But when she drew back the curtains she could not suppress the gasp of amaze­ment that escaped her at the sight that met her startled eyes. The snow which last night had eased so dramati­cally had returned with full vigour and beyond the frosted panes of glass all she could see were the whirling flakes.

She drew back the curtains completely and turning back to the bed reached for her dressing gown. Heavens, she thought, not without a trace of unease now, how long was this storm going to last? Had it been snowing all night, and if so, however was she to find her car, never mind get it to the hotel?

Opening her door, she peeped out. No one was about and picking up her toilet things she made her way quickly down the passage to the bathroom. Once inside, she turned on the bath taps and while the bath filled she cleaned her teeth at the porcelain hand-basin. She was so intent on thinking about the deplorable weather con­ditions that she did not notice that the bath was not steaming as it should have done and when she put one foot tentatively into its depths she drew back with a gasp of dismay. The water was cold and her foot tingled from that icy contact.

With an exclamation of annoyance, she pulled out the plug and allowed the water to drain away while she doused her face and hands in the running water at the basin. Then, compressing her lips, she opened the bath­room door and came face to face with the man she had seen the night before and whom Bothwell had called Alaister.

'Oh!' She stepped back in surprise, wrapping her house­coat closer about her slim figure, but the old man merely regarded her sourly.

'Morning,' he grunted abruptly, and Melanie forced a smile.

'Good morning,' she responded politely. 'Er - the water's cold.'

Alaister eyed her derisively. 'Och, ay, is that so? Then the boiler's gone out again.'

Melanie moved past him. 'Does it often go out?' she inquired, deciding that were she in charge of the hotel it would not be allowed to do so.

Alaister sniffed. 'Och ay, occasionally. Ye'll no freeze to death. Sean will have seen there's a good fire in the dining-room.'

'That's reassuring,' commented Melanie, a trifle dryly, beginning to feel decidedly cold.

Alaister made a sound very much like a snort. 'If ye'd wanted the comforts of a plush hotel, ye shouldna ha' come to Cairnside,' he retorted grimly, and going into the bathroom he slammed the door behind him.

Melanie was taken aback by his rudeness. What a dis­agreeable old man, she thought angrily, marching down the passage to her room again. Surely expecting hot water to wash with in the mornings was not unreasonable?

Back in her room, she rummaged in her cases for warm pants and a chunky sweater and dressed before doing her hair. She had shoulder-length hair which she sometimes put up for evenings, but this morning an Alice band se­cured it and she was quite satisfied with the result. A glance at the window showed that it was still snowing and collecting her handbag she left her room.

Downstairs it was considerably warmer. The previous evening she had dined in the small dining-room that opened off the hall and she had seen her fellow guests. There were four of them altogether, including Alaister; two elderly women who looked like retired school­mistresses, and another man who seemed a more cheerful individual. But as she had left the dining-room immedi­ately after her meal to make her call to London, she had not learned their names. Nor had she seen either Bothwell or the blonde girl again. The elderly man who tended the fires and seemed general factotum about the place had shown her where the telephone kiosk was situated and the maid who had made up her bed was the same one who had served dinner in the dining-room. Melanie thought they would not need a large staff here. There were so few visitors and even accounting for the evening callers to the bar at the other side of the building they could not make a lot of money.

After making her call she had gone straight to bed, but now thinking of that call, Melanie sighed. Maybe Michael had been right in his protestations about her coming so far alone at this time of the year. She had deliberately refrained from mentioning how nearly she had sought disaster on her way here, but he still expressed his anxieties on her behalf and urged her to return home immediately and abandon the whole idea.

Melanie sighed again. Everything should have gone so smoothly, but as it was... She shrugged. Who knew what might happen? She could get snowed up here, and then what would she do?

A roaring fire was burning in the grate in the dining- room, but the room was empty. The hotel fires burned logs and as well as giving off a tremendous amount of heat they smelt sweetly of pine. She was standing, her back to the fire, feeling wonderfully warm and glowing, when the door opened again to admit Bothwell.

Dressed this morning in knee-length black boots, close- fitting black trousers that moulded the muscles of his thighs, and a laced leather waistcoat over a bronze shirt, he looked powerful and disturbing, and Melanie at­tempted to return the challenging look he sent in her direction. The idea of being snowed up here with this man was infinitely more frustrating than she cared to admit.

'Ah! Good morning, Miss Stewart,' he greeted her, nodding his head politely. 'I trust you had a good night.'

Melanie moved away from the fire. 'I slept beautifully, thank you, Mr. Bothwell.'

'Good. I thought you might. The beds here are noted for their comfort.'

Melanie bit her hp. 'It was quite a novelty, having a couple of hot water bottles again. I'm afraid I've got quite spoilt with electric blankets!'

Now why had she said that? she asked herself im­patiently. Last night she had found the warmth of the hot water bottles rather comforting. Maybe it was his complete self-confidence that aroused this streak of per­versity inside her. At any event, she need not have troubled herself. Bothwell was superbly at his ease, as he said:

'It's a great pity when people forget that their bodies were given them to use and not to abuse. I find electric blankets destroy the body's natural powers of self-heat­ing.'

Melanie held up her head. 'I'm sure you're right,' she returned shortly. 'However, not everyone has your will power, I'm afraid. I'm weak enough to succumb to comfort before anything else.'

He shrugged. 'That's your affair, of course. But if that is how you feel, then I should have thought you would have chosen a less - shall we say - demanding time of the year to visit Scotland!'

Melanie coloured. 'I'm quite prepared to face any kind of conditions,' she retorted, his cool insolence getting under her skin in spite of her efforts to remain calm.

'Indeed?' He drew out a case of small cigars and placed one between Iris lips. Before flicking his lighter he said: 'Do you mind?' and at her abrupt shake of her head he lit the cigar and inhaled deeply. 'I'm glad you feel like that, Miss Stewart,' he continued smoothly, 'because it seems that you may have to share our hospitality for slightly longer than you had originally intended.'

Melanie stared at him. 'Why?'

He studied the tip of his cigar. 'Weather conditions in this area are unpredictable. Unless you intend to leave soon, you may not be able to leave at all.'

Melanie moved impatiently. 'I can't leave until—' She halted abruptly. 'Is there any chance of getting my car?'

He half smiled. 'I very much doubt it.'

Melanie heaved a sigh, suppressing a faint sense of panic that ensued at the knowledge that she might well become an unwilling prisoner here. 'I see. Well, we shall just have to make the best of it, shan't we?' Her eyes held his for a long moment before falling before that gaze.

'My dear Miss Stewart, if you are prepared to make the best of it, who am I to complain?'

'I shouldn't like to put you out,' she retorted, stung by his indifference.

'You will not put me out, rest assured, Miss Stewart. I am perfectly used to the vagaries of your sex! If it amuses you to drive several hundred miles to stay at an hotel in the heart of the Highlands in these conditions, that is your affair!'

Melanie's colour deepened. Yes, it is,' she said sharply.

He smiled at her agitation. 'All will be revealed in time, no doubt,' he remarked dryly. 'Until then - you must excuse me!'

He turned to go when she called him back. "Mr. Both- well!'

Yes?' He turned, his expression sardonic.

Melanie straightened her shoulders. 'Perhaps you will let me know when I may take a bath,' she said scathingly.

Bothwell's eyebrows lifted. 'Ah, yes, of course, Miss Stewart. My apologies! The boiler died on us last night. However, it is going now and if you would like to take a bath after breakfast..He spread a hand expressively.

Melanie nodded. 'Thank you.'

'I gather your brave protestations of being ready to face any hazard do not encompass cold baths!' he re­marked dryly, and went out of the room before she could think of any scornful reply.

Melanie was still standing, biting her lips grimly, when the door opened again and the two elderly women came in. They looked across at her speculatively and deciding it was up to her to attempt to make contact, Melanie smiled and said: 'Good morning! Isn't the weather appalling!'

One of the two women returned her greeting while the other said: 'We're used to these conditions. We live here, you see.'

Melanie raised her eyebrows. 'Oh! Do you?'

'Yes.' That was the other woman. 'My sister and I re­tired several years ago and as we've often holidayed in this part of Caledonia, we thought it would be rather a pleasant place to retire to.'

'I see,' Melanie nodded. 'I expect you prefer it when it's a little warmer, though, don't you?'

The two women exchanged glances. 'Oh, we like it all the year round,' one of them volunteered. 'Winters here arc like they used to be. Plenty of snow, and log fires, and roasting chestnuts ...'

'... and lots of berries on the holly,' put in the other. 'Are you staying here over Christmas, Miss - Miss—'

'Stewart,' supplied Melanie automatically. 'Melanie Stewart.'

The two women exchanged glances again, and then one of them said: 'We're called Sullivan; Jane and Elizabeth Sullivan.'

'How do you do?' Melanie shook hands with them politely when it became obvious that it was expected of her. 'But no, I'm not expecting to stay over Christmas. I have to be back in London in a little under a week. I have a job there, you see.'

'Oh?' Elizabeth Sullivan looked expectant. 'What kind of a job do you do, Miss Stewart?'

Melanie shrugged. 'Actually I illustrate children's books.'

'Really?' the sisters were obviously intrigued. 'How interesting!'

Melanie smiled. 'Yes, it is rather. I enjoy it, anyway. What I really want to do, though, is write the stories, too. And illustrate them myself, naturally.'

'Naturally.' The two women were clearly impressed. 'And why have you come to Cairnside, Miss Stewart?' asked Jane Sullivan. 'Are you researching material?'

Melanie sighed. Was everyone here so inquisitive, or was it simply a case of friendly interest? Either way, she had either to answer their question or snub them as she had attempted to snub Bothwell.

Deciding she could not in all decency ignore their query, Melanie said carefully: 'I - I've come to see a house near here. Monkshood.'

"Monkshood!' The two sisters looked at one another again. Then Elizabeth frowned. 'Would that be the house belonging to the late Angus Cairney?'

Melanie's eyes brightened. 'Why yes, that's right. Do you know it?'

Elizabeth shrugged her plump shoulders. 'I know of it, yes,' she amended slowly. She looked at Jane for support. You know the house, too, don't you, Jane?'

Jane Sullivan fumbled with her handbag. 'Och, it's that ugly old place near the village, isn't it?'

Elizabeth nodded. 'Of course.' She looked back at Melanie. 'But what would you be wanting with such a mon­strosity? Surely you're not thinking of buying the old place!'

Melanie warmed her hands at the blaze. 'No/ she said, honestly. 'No, I'm not thinking of buying it. I just want to see it, that's all.'

'And you've come all this way just to see Monkshood!' exclaimed Elizabeth in horror. 'In the depths of winter!'

Melanie was growing a little tired of this catechism. 'Yes,' she said firmly. 'Perhaps you could tell me how to get there?'

But just at that moment the dining-room door opened again to admit the man called Alaister, and the two eld­erly ladies wished him a smiling 'Good morning' before taking their seats at a table for two.

Melanie sighed and walked across to her own table laid for one. Her question would have to wait. Besides, there was no hurry. It was still snowing and looked as though it was likely to continue to do so for some considerable time.

The meal, like the delicious dinner she had consumed the night before, was very enjoyable. There were Scottish kippers on the menu, as well as the most conventional kinds of breakfast foods, and Melanie ate well, deciding she might as well linger over the meal to fill in some time. By the time she left the dining-room, the others had gone and she decided to take a look round the hotel.

As well as the reception hall and dining-room there was a small lounge complete with a television, which somehow seemed out of place here. There was the public bar, and a bar lounge adjoining, but the remainder of the rooms were marked private and were obviously used by the landlord and his family. The blonde girl was at the reception desk again as Melanie passed through the hall on her way upstairs, and on impulse she approached her and said: 'Did you telephone the garage in Rossmore for

me?'

The girl looked up. 'No, miss, but I don't hold out much hope in these conditions. It's only a small garage, you understand, hardly a breakdown station.'

'But surely there's somewhere in the area capable of towing my car in,' Melanie exclaimed in surprise.

The girl shrugged. 'At this time of the year they're pretty well snowed under, if you'll pardon the expression, by emergency calls. I don't think towing your car down to Cairnside could be classed as an emergency, do you?'

Melanie compressed her lips. 'No,' she admitted re­luctantly.

The girl smiled rather sympathetically, but Melanie was in no mood to appreciate it and she turned away abruptly, only to be halted again as the girl offered:

'I can ring the garage in Newtoncross, if you like.'

Melanie turned back. 'Is that near here?'

'Not exactly. But it is the nearest town of any size and there might be someone there who can help you.'

'Very well. Thank you.' Melanie accepted the offer rather ungraciously and then made her way up to her room. Now that the heating was working again, the room was warm and comfortable, and as her bed had been made Melanie carried the basket chair near the bed to the window and seated herself in it looking out somewhat resignedly. If Michael knew the weather was so unpre­dictable he would insist on her leaving right away and returning to London. But, she asked herself, how could she achieve such a thing even if she wanted to? Her car was lost and abandoned, until someone chose to dig it out, and Cairnside was not at all what she had expected.

Back in London it had all seemed so simple, childishly simple! She would drive up here to the hotel the solicitors had mentioned vaguely and take her first look at Monks­hood. But in London the weather had been temperate, with only frosts to contend with, and occasional squalls of rain. No one had prepared her for such extremes as these, and even now she found it difficult to believe that it could List much longer. To return to London without even seeing the house would be too galling. Michael, she knew, would fall over backwards trying to appear sympathetic, when actually he would be feeling delighted that she had proved yet again that she could not manage anything without him. Maybe it was because she had no parents that he felt such a strong protective urge towards her, but whatever it was it became a little overbearing at times and that was why Melanie was determined to succeed in this venture, despite Bothwell's sarcasm and the de­plorable conditions.

She got up from her chair and paced restlessly about the room. What was one supposed to do here when the weather was like this? One simply could not stay in one's bedroom all day!

She paused by the window and looked out. Her room overlooked the forecourt of the hotel and she could see the man who had shown her where the phone was the night before busily shovelling snow. Maybe she could go out for a walk after all. If she wrapped up warmly and put on her Wellingtons she could hardly come to any harm, not if she stuck to the road. She could possibly make her way to the village and inquire the whereabouts of Monkshood, without arousing any further speculation in the hotel.

The decision made, she felt much more cheerful, and she turned to her suitcases eagerly. Luckily she had brought Wellingtons with her in case of wet weather, but judging by the conditions it would be some weeks before this area became warm enough to invite rain. She half smiled to herself. Until now, she had never encountered conditions like these.

A few minutes later, warmly clad in her sheepskin coat and a fur hat, mittens muffling her hands and Wellingtons hugging her slender legs, she went downstairs, The hall was deserted apart from a Border collie who was showing more interest in a meaty bone than anything else and Melanie crossed to the outer door.

Both the door leading into the lobby and the door to the yard were heavy to swing open, but she managed it and emerged into a white world so cold it took her breath away. In the hotel, it had seemed almost inviting looking out on the snow-covered yard, but now that she was actu­ally out here Melanie had second thoughts. She looked about her, blinking in the flurries of snow that caught on her long lashes and invaded her nose and mouth, but there was no one with whom to pass the time of day. The man who earlier had been shovelling snow had appar­ently disappeared round the back of the hotel and only the path he had cleared was evidence of his presence.

Sighing, Melanie thrust her hands into her pockets and hesitated, stamping her feet indecisively. She knew die direction of the village, but wasn't she being a little fool­hardy attempting to walk there in this?

She looked round at the hotel. Its mellowed walls were smudged with clinging flakes, while its eaves were laden with more snow. It looked somehow warm and comfort­able and inviting and Melanie was tempted to abandon her ideas altogether. But the thought of spending the whole day in the hotel, wasting time, was more than she could bear, and with determination she set off.

It wasn't so bad, actually. The snow covering the ground had taken away the glassiness and she could walk quite briskly and keep warm. The road was quite clearly defined in daylight, the tracks of the one or two vehicles which had passed this way providing a trail, and Mel­anie's spirits lifted. This was better than sitting in the hotel, hugging the fire, and listening to the click of the Misses Sullivans' knitting needles. Which was perhaps a little unkind, she conceded silently to herself, as she did not really know whether they knitted or not.

Beyond a curve in the road, she came upon a snow- covered gateway, and something made her stop and stare beyond the gate to the house at the head of a tree-lined drive. The whole place looked neglected, even in its blanket of snow, and she hesitated for a moment before stepping across the grass to the gate itself.

She looked up the drive speculatively. The house was empty, certainly, and it backed the mist-shrouded moun­tains as did the hotel. And if she was not mistaken, the village was not much further now. She frowned. Jane Sul­livan had said it was near the village, so this could con­ceivably be Monkshood.

Without waiting to consider her actions, she pushed open the gate and walked slowly up the drive. The keys the solicitors had given her in Fort William were lying in her handbag at the hotel, so she would not be able to go inside, but she could not resist taking a look round and maybe peeping through the windows.

It was certainly an ugly old place, as Jane Sullivan had said. Not even the frosting of snow could improve upon its square windows and heavy eaves, and the straggling creepers that clung grimly to its walls gave it a rather ominous appearance.

To her disappointment the front windows were shuttered downstairs and she walked disconsolately round die back, following what appeared to be a path through straggling gardens interspersed with pine trees.

To her astonishment, there were footprints at the back of the house - huge footprints that laced and interlaced the area just outside the back door. Some had obviously been made some days ago, as these were already be­ginning to disappear under more layers of snow, but some seemed to have been freshly made.

She frowned. Could she possibly have made a mistake? Was this not Monkshood after all? If so, she was trespass­ing on someone else's property.

She shook her head in bewilderment. Cairnside was such a sparsely habited area it seemed incredible that there could be two houses possessing the same charac­teristics and both in such an obvious state of neglect. She had been prepared for neglect, the solicitors had warned her of that, but they had also said that basically the house was sound and that was why she wanted to see it for herself.

The silence all around the house was almost deafening. Even the snow fell silently, and Melanie felt a sense of unease assail her. What if she was right? What if this was Monkshood and someone was using it as a sleeping place? After all, there had been no footprints at the front of the house, so whoever it was wanted to remain anonymous, it would seem.

She shivered momentarily. There were footprints at the front now. *Her* footprints! And anyone looking out of an upper floor window would see them. A desire to run assailed her, and only the memory of Michael's smiling contention that she would never be able to manage alone caused her to still her racing pulses. She was being melo­dramatic, allowing the silence to get the better of her. This was her house, after all, and if anyone was inside, 11 icy would jolly well have to shift themselves.

Stepping forward, she tried the handle of the back door. To her astonishment, it gave under her fingers and he pushed it open incredulously.

The door fell back to reveal a kitchen, stark and cold. There was a range of the like Melanie had never seen before, which appeared to provide cooking as well as lu lling facilities, a scrubbed kitchen table, somewhat mildewed now with dampness, and several plain wooden chairs.

She hesitated on the threshold, listening, but there were no sounds. It seemed that whoever was using the place was not at home at the moment. She stepped inside, but refrained from closing the door behind her - just in case!

Resisting the impulse to walk on tiptoe, she crossed the kitchen and opened the door at its farthest side. This led into a passage which, although it was gloomy, could be seen to lead directly through the house to the front door. At the end of the passage, near the front door, stairs could be seen running up, and there were several doors opening from the passage itself.

Melanie grew a little more confident. There was no sign here of anyone's habitation, and she threw open the door opposite the kitchen door.

This appeared to be the dining-room. There was a table, heavily covered with dust, several chairs, and an antique dresser loaded with grimy plates and cups.

Another door revealed a kind of study, with books against the walls, and a desk that would do marvellously for her illustration work. Yet another room appeared to be the lounge, with an old suite and several odd chairs and tables. The whole house, it would appear, if the upstairs was the same, was furnished after a fashion, and Melanie thought that a good spring-cleaning was what was needed. Indeed, her spirits rose higher, if she was stranded in Cairnside for any length of time, she might be able to accomplish this herself.

She was so absorbed with her exciting reasoning, that she did not hear footsteps descending the threadbare carpet on the stairs, nor hear a man approach the door­way of the lounge to stand regarding her with obvious astonishment, until a deep voice said:

'Do you mind telling me what the hell you're doing in here?'

Melanie almost collapsed, so great was the shock, and she swung round to face Sean Bothwell.

'You!' she exclaimed, in disbelief. 'It was your footsteps I saw outside!'

'It was,' he agreed uncompromisingly, his expression grim. 'But you haven't answered my question. I asked you what you thought you were doing here!'

Melanie quivered a little under that penetrating stare. 'I - I might ask you the same question,' she retorted.

Bothwell's eyes narrowed. 'I asked the question first,' he said, with harsh insistence in his voice.

Melanie swallowed hard. 'Very well, then. I - I own this house.' She put a hand to her lips. 'This is - Monks­hood, isn't it?'

There was a moment when she thought she had been mistaken after all; when she began to think frantically that she had made some terrible mistake, and had indeed invaded someone else's private property.

And then he said, slowly and clearly: 'Yes, Miss Stewart, this is Monkshood. But you are not the owner. *I am!’*

CHAPTER THREE

MelaniE, was speechless for a moment and she stood star­ing helplessly at Bothwell as though he were some kind of malignant spirit. Then, gathering her scattered senses, she said carefully:

'I think there's been some mistake, Mr. Bothwell. Angus Cairney was my mother's cousin. She was his only relative, and as she is dead, Monkshood was left to me.'

Bothwell's light eyes were veiled by the long black lashes that were the only feminine thing about an other­wise harshly masculine face. The long sideburns that grew down to his jawline accentuated the darkness of his features and added to his air of command. In different clothes he would have fitted well into a more primitive era of history, and Melanie had the distinct impression that even today Sean Bothwell was a law unto himself.

'I see,' he said now. 'And who told you Monkshood was yours?'

'Why - why, the solicitors, of course.'

'What solicitors?' His tone demanded no prevarication on her part and she found herself saying:

'McDougall and Price, naturally.'

'Ah!' He ran a hand down his cheek thoughtfully. 'They contacted you in London?'

'My solicitors, yes.'

Melanie stiffened. She was allowing her own surprise at finding him here to weaken her resolve, and he was simply using her to gain whatever information he could get. Straightening her shoulders, she said:

'And now perhaps you'll tell me why you should imagine Monkshood belongs to you?'

Bothwell turned those light eyes upon her and she moved a little uncomfortably. She would not admit to being afraid of him exactly, but he did disturb her in a way no man had hitherto disturbed her. It was his atti­tude; she could not be certain what he might say or do next, and it was most disconcerting. She had always found men reasonably easy to handle, but Sean Bothwell was different somehow.

'Angus Carney was my father,' he said now, his eyes narrowed and speculative.

Melanie fell back a step. 'What?' She shook her head helplessly. 'But - but the solicitors! They didn't even know he was married!'

Sean Bothwell gave her a derisive stare. 'He wasn't,' he said deliberately.

Melanie felt the hot colour surge up her cheeks at his words and she twisted her fingers together nervously. She was sure he was enjoying her discomfiture, but that didn't prevent her feeling of mortification. Compressing her lips, she tried desperately to find something to say, but his statement was irrefutable.

As though relenting a little, Bothwell took his eyes from her confusion and glanced round the room. Taking out his case, he put a cigar between his lips and lit it before walking across to the windows. They were shut­tered here, as in all the downstairs rooms, but it was pos­sible to see through the slats. He stared out broodingly for a while, giving her time to collect herself, and Melanie was somewhat relieved. Even so, she dreaded the moment when he would turn and their conversation would have to continue.

Eventually he moved away from the window and she felt his eyes flicker over her again. Melanie felt an awful sense of inadequacy assail her, and wished for the first time that she had waited for Michael to accompany her to Cairnside. Surely this situation could never have hap­pened if he had been with her. He would have insisted on her making proper inquiries and making an official visit here to look round. He would never have countenanced an impulsive invasion into someone's privacy. And yet she had not known what old emotions she was rekindling when she pushed open the door of Monkshood.

'Well?' he said finally, spreading his hand expressively. 'What do you intend to do with it?'

Melanie stared at him, pressing her lips together to prevent them from trembling. 'I - I - oh, I don't know,' she said, bending her head. 'I -1 no longer feel I have any right to the place!'

His eyes narrowed chillingly.'Oh,come now,Miss Stew­art! Spare me the platitudes! I'm quite aware that I've shocked your little system to the core, but don't allow it to colour your judgment. I'm sure McDougall and Price would agree with me in that at least!'

Melanie bit her lip. 'Your - your father made a will-'

'I guessed that. I would imagine it was made some time ago, however.'

'Yes.' Melanie looked away from him, unable to suffer that bleak appraisal. 'Perhaps he left a second—'

Bothwell shrugged his broad shoulders. Tie had prob­ably forgotten he had made the first. He was an old man, Miss Stewart, not much concerned with worldly matters.'

Melanie shook her head. 'My mother only mentioned him a couple of times. I never met him.'

Your mother must have been his only relative. He never married.'

'But your mother— began Melanie impulsively, only to halt uncertainly as his expression darkened.

'My mother was already married - to someone else,' he advised her harshly. 'I do not think the details of my conception need concern you.'

Melanie turned away. 'I feel terrible...'

'Why should you?' His voice was cold. 'We cannot be held responsible for the actions of others.' He walked towards the door, drawing on fur-lined leather gloves. 'I'll leave you to investigate your property. Just one point, when you decide to sell the place, I'd like first refusal.'

'Oh, please,' Melanie turned to him again, holding out her hands in a gesture almost of supplication. 'Please, don't go. I - well - I wish you would stay.'

His eyes surveyed her broodingly. 'Why?'

Melanie loosened her fur hat, taking it off and allowing her hair to swing in a dark silky curtain against her flushed cheeks. 'We - we're almost related, aren't we? Surely we can be friends. I'd like your advice.'

Bothwell leaned indolently against the door post. 'You do not strike me as the kind of woman who would take advice from anyone,' he observed dryly.

Melanie quelled her indignation. 'Why do you say that?'

He frowned. 'Surely there was someone back home who advised you not to come to Cairnside at this time of the year, wasn't there? You're wearing an engagement ring - didn't your fiance express any doubts on your behalf, or is the ring merely a decoration, designed to arouse speculation?'

Melanie looked down at the square-cut diamond Mich­ael had bought her. She was so used to wearing it, she had not thought he would notice. 'I am engaged, yes,' she said slowly. 'And my fiance did suggest that I should wait until the spring to come here, but surely you can under­stand my anxieties about a house standing empty all winter?'

Bothwell straightened. "You could have had someone look after it for you. The solicitors would no doubt have been pleased to arrange it.'

Melanie compressed her lips. 'I didn't think of it,' she replied.

Bothwell shook his head. 'Exactly why did you want to come here yourself?'

Melanie sighed. 'My reasons wouldn't stand up to your cold-blooded assessment of the situation,' she answered impatiently.

Bothwell looked wryly at her. Try me!'

Melanie tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. 'I wanted to see the house because I've never owned a house before. I've never even lived in a house, so far as I can remember. We always had flats or apartments, and I sup­pose foolishly I thought I might make a home here.'

'I see.' Bothwell drew deeply on his cigar. 'And your fiance? Is he agreeable to moving north?'

Melanie made an involuntary gesture. 'I - I haven't actually discussed it with him yet. He's a solicitor - in London.'

'Then perhaps you should,' Bothwell observed dryly.

Melanie's colour deepened again. 'Do you think I'm stupid?'

'Why? To discuss it with your fiance?'

'No, you know what I mean. For wanting to keep the house?'

Bothwell threw the butt of his cigar into the empty fire grate. 'If I say yes, my reasons are bound to be biased, aren't they?'

Melanie shrugged. 'In the circumstances, I think you should tell me what you think.'

'Why?'

Melanie spread her hands expressively. 'The house is much more yours than mine!'

'Oh , no, Miss Stewart. It's your house.'

Melanie stared at him helplessly. 'You're deliberately misunderstanding me,' she accused him. 'Why did you want the house anyway?'

Bothwell shrugged. 'To live in - what else?'

Melanie sighed. 'If I were a man, we could perhaps have come to some compromise—'

'If you were a man the situation would not arise. You would simply sell the place and not involve yourself in a lot of sentimental nonsense about making a home—'

'How dare you!' Melanie stared at him angrily. 'If I want to get away from London, surely that's my affair!'

Bothwell's light eyes were coldly contemptuous. 'If you want to get away from London so badly, perhaps you should examine your motives more closely,' he said. 'It may not be just London, after all!'

'What do you mean?'

Bothwell turned to the door. 'I'm afraid I don't have the time to stand here arguing with you all morning, Miss Stewart. Some of us have jobs to do. Excuse me!' And with that he turned and strode away down the passage.

After he had gone, Melanie stood for a few moments heaving a shaking breath. Always, after a confrontation with him, she felt completely enervated.

However, after a few minutes she gathered her com­posure and looked about her again. It was no use allowing his bitterness to influence her judgment, and besides, it was by no means certain that she would in fact keep the house. Michael would have to approve and somehow she

could not see him subjecting himself to these kind of con­ditions in winter without a great deal of inducement . . .

But for herself, the location was perfect. There was so much freedom and life and animal activity here and it would be a perfect place to write the kind of books she wanted to write.

Upstairs was very similar to downstairs, she found as she continued her explorations. The house was furnished, but if she intended living here, she would need to make a lot of changes. She paused to wonder why Bothwell had been in the house, and then shook her head. After all, he had presumed the house to be his, so why shouldn't he be here?

It was after twelve-thirty as she left Monkshood to return to the hotel for lunch, and still snowing as heavily as ever. To her surprise she found a bunch of keys lying on the kitchen table, and guessed these were the keys Both- well had used to let himself in and out. Conversely, she wished he had kept the keys, somehow. It seemed so final just handing them over like that. She could not suppress the feeling of guilt that assailed her in that moment.

Trudging up the road to the hotel she was surprised to see a sleek sports car parked in front, its gleaming paint­work liberally splashed with slush. It looked so incon­gruous, somehow, beside the rather workmanlike bulk of the Range-Rover, and she wondered who it belonged to. Another guest, perhaps?

Lunch was at one, so she had time to go upstairs and wash her face and shed her outdoor clothes before the meal. There was no one in the reception hall although voices could be heard from the bar, so perhaps whoever it was was just having a drink.

When she came downstairs again, she went straight into the dining-room and discovered the Sullivan sisters seated by the fire talking to the other elderly man who was staying at the hotel. They greeted her in quite a friendly fashion, and then introduced her to the other guest. His name was Ian Macdonald and he asked her where she had been to get such colour in her cheeks.

Deciding she might as well make a clean breast of it, Melanie said: 'Actually, I went to see Monkshood.' She smiled at Jane Sullivan. 'You had said it was near the village, and I found it easily.'

'Oh, did you?' Jane Sullivan raised her eyebrows with assumed indifference.

'Monkshood!' Ian Macdonald frowned. 'What would you be wanting with that old place? Is it up for sale, after all? Sean didn't say anything about selling!'

Melanie intercepted a look that Elizabeth Sullivan cast in his direction with meaningful intensity, but Ian Mac­donald was not to be silenced. 'Now then, Lizzie,' he de­clared loudly, 'everyone knows Sean owns Monkshood. Sure and wasn't it from old Angus himself that he in­herited his cussedness?'

Melanie bent her head. Confronted by such an argu­ment, she could not say that Monkshood belonged to her. Instead she turned with some relief as the young maid came in with the first trays of lunch, and everyone was forced to take their seats at their tables. Alaister came in after the maid, and he joined Ian Macdonald at his table, and as the two Sullivan sisters were talking together Mel­anie was relieved of the necessity of saying anything more.

The meal was delicious. Game soup was followed by a mouth-watering steak and kidney pie, and to complete the meal there was apple tart and custard. The food might be unimaginative, thought Melanie, replete, but at least it was beautifully served, and extremely appetizing.

She felt sure that several weeks here would add several pounds to her figure which she could do without.

After the meal, the older guests retired to their rooms, and Melanie carried her second cup of coffee to the seat by the fire, smiling at the maid who came to clear the tables.

Now that she had seen the house and made her own assessment of it, there was nothing to keep her in Cairn- side. She could return to London as she had originally planned. Bothwell's suggestion that she could find some­body to look after the upkeep of the building had solved her most immediate problems and apart from the difficulty of getting her car there was nothing to prevent her from leaving. Of course, she could return to London by train and send for her car later, when the weather improved, but somehow she was loath to do that. Maybe in a couple of days she would be able to find a garage willing to dig it out for her, and in the meantime she could content herself by taking measurements for curtains and carpets, etc.

She sighed, looking at the snow that was still falling heavily beyond the windows of the dining-room. If Mich­ael knew of her predicament, he would demand that she return by train immediately, but she was in no hurry to leave just yet. Apart from her clashes with Bothwell, she was quite enjoying herself here, and certainly the snow was a novelty. Why should she rush back to town until she was absolutely ready to do so?

Suddenly there was the sound of voices, and the dining-room door opened to admit Bothwell himself and a girl who Melanie had not seen before. The girl was as tall as Melanie, but much slimmer, so that the bones of her face were almost gauntly visible. Her hair was Scan­dinavian fair, and accentuated the pallor of her skin, and although she was not unattractive, her clothes were so lacking in elegance that she looked positively ungainly. She was clinging to Bothwell's arm, and looking up into his face adoringly, and Melanie felt uncomfortably aware that she should not have witnessed this scene. This aware­ness was heightened when Bothwell himself saw her and his cold light eyes bored chillingly into hers. Melanie was tempted to rise and leave them, but to do so would auto­matically draw attention to herself, so she curled up a little more closely in her chair, tucking her legs beneath her and returned her gaze to the leaping flames from the logs in the grate.

Bothwell released himself from the girl's clinging grasp and taking her hand instead said: 'Jennie, I'd like you to meet a new visitor to the Black Bull: Miss Stewart!'

Now Melanie was forced to turn and acknowledge them, and she got reluctantly to her feet, intensely aware of Bothwell's appraising stare. She had not bothered to change the trousers and sweater she had been wearing earlier, but under his gaze she felt stripped of all com­posure.

'How do you do?' the girl spoke suddenly, taking Melanie's hand warmly. 'I'm Jennifer Craig.'

Melanie smiled a greeting and Jennifer went on casually: 'I live quite near here, beyond the village at the head of the loch. Have you come to stay long?'

Melanie was disconcerted by the girl's frankness, and she found herself saying: 'I don't expect so. Unless the weather conditions force me to do so.'

Jennifer chuckled. Yes, it is pretty dreadful, isn't it? I was just suggesting to Sean that we should arrange a skat­ing party if the loch ices over. But we're used to the weather, of course, aren't we, Sean?'

'Indeed we are,' he confirmed dryly, looking not at

Melanie now but at Jennifer, his expression so tender in its gentleness that a strange tightness came to Melanie's throat. Certainly, he would never look at her in that way, she thought, and then chided herself for thinking such thoughts.

'Are you on holiday, Miss Stewart?' Jennifer was asking now.

Melanie bit her lip. "Not exactly,' she temporized.

'Miss Stewart has come to see Monkshood,' put in Both- well, his gaze flicking coolly to Melanie again.

'Monkshood?' Jennifer was obviously surprised. 'Are you interested in old buildings, Miss Stewart?'

Before Melanie could think of some suitable reply, Both- well spoke again, his voice curt and chilling. 'Miss Stewart is the new owner of Monkshood,' he informed her.

Jennifer gasped. 'You mean - you mean Angus had relatives, after all?'

Bothwell shrugged. 'One relative,' he amended, expressionlessly.

'Oh, Scan!' Jennifer stared at him with obvious con­cern.

'Don't look so distressed, Jennie,' Bothwell commanded gently, putting an arm about her thin shoulders and hug­ging her lightly. 'Miss Stewart may yet decide to sell the house to me.'

Jennifer sighed, and turned back to Melanie. 'Oh, might you do that, Miss Stewart? We - at least - Scan hoped to own Monkshood.'

Melanie pressed the palms of her hands together. 'I - I haven't decided what to do with the house yet,' said Melanie truthfully.

Jennifer regarded her appealingly. 'Mr. Cairney always said that the house would be Sean's one day—' she began, when Bothwell interrupted her.

'Miss Stewart is not interested in our reasons for want­ing the house,' he said tersely. Then looking at Melanie again he said: 'I expect you'll be leaving us soon, Miss Stewart, now that you've seen the house.'

Melanie was taken aback at the bleakness of his ex­pression. 'I - I haven't decided about that either,' she exclaimed.

'Then perhaps you should,' he said. 'The weather is gradually worsening and the forecast is not en­couraging.'

'You seem to forget, my car is still out on the side of the road somewhere,' Melanie retaliated hotly.

'No, it's not.' Bothwell released Jennifer to take out his case of cigars. 'The garage in Rossmore went out this morr.ing and located it. I should imagine it is presently being towed down to the hotel.'

Melanie felt a pang of dismay. 'But - but the girl at the desk didn't think they would be able to manage it— she began.

Bothwell's eyes darkened. 'I spoke to the manager myself. I explained that you didn't want to delay with the state of the roads as they are.'

Melanie could have stamped her foot, so exasperated did she feel. 'I don't recall stating how long I intended to stay!' she said abruptly. 'I suppose I must thank you for getting my car, but I really don't know when I'll be leav­ing!'

Jennifer was viewing this exchange with some concern, and Melanie started for the door. She would not stay here any longer and argue with him over something that was her concern and hers alone.

Bothwell reached the door before her, however, lean­ing one hand against the panels, preventing her from opening it.

'If you're troubled about the state of the house in your absence, don't be,' he advised her coldly. 'I've looked after the place for the last three months, since Angus died, and I'm quite prepared to go on doing so until you make some definite decision about it.'

Melanie stiffened. 'Thank you, Mr. Bothwell, but there are some things I want to do before I leave.'

'Such as what?'

'I don't see that it's your concern, but if you insist, I'm thinking of cleaning the whole place out.' She wasn't in all honesty thinking of doing any such thing, but she would not allow him to turn her away from Cairnside by his attitude.

Jennifer turned now. 'But, Miss Stewart, you couldn't possibly tackle such a task. The whole place needs a com­plete spring-clean. It's absolutely filthy!'

Melanie managed a faint smile. 'That's all right. I'm not afraid of hard work, Miss Craig. In fact, I shall enjoy doing it.' She looked challengingly at Bothwell. 'Now, if you'll both excuse me..

Bothwell removed his hand, but not before she had seen the fire burning in his light eyes at her rejection of his help. He turned away and Melanie smiled once more at Jennifer before opening the door. It was not until the door had closed behind her and she was on her way up­stairs that she realized she was trembling.

In her room, she paced about restlessly. Why did Both- well desire her to leave so urgently? What harm was she doing him by staying here? She was sorry about the house, of course, but against his cold contempt she could do nothing, and he would not believe that she really did feel badly about it. He was a proud, arrogant man, she conceded at last, and he obviously wanted nothing from anyone like her. From the beginning his attitude towards her had been one of scarcely-veiled impatience, and he clearly considered her irresponsible for disobeying his suggestions. But they had not been suggestions, she told herself angrily, they had been commands, and that was why she had reacted against them so strongly. He had no right to attempt to tell her what she should or should not do, and just because she had been confiding enough to tell him of her hopes for the house he considered her silly and sentimental and totally lacking in common sense.

She walked moodily to the window. The most sensible thing to do would be to do as he had said and return to London right away. Now that she knew the house would be well cared for she could leave all her vaguely-formed plans and ideas for the spring, when it would be a far less arduous task convincing Michael of the merits of the place. And, in addition, Michael could come up with her next time and share her enthusiasm.

She turned back and looked round the room. A deep core of resentment was building up inside her, and she knew she did not want to leave. She wanted to stay and spring-clean the house as she had stated so carelessly downstairs. She wanted to see the shutters taken away from the windows and smoke curling from the chimneys, and the whole place clean and shining.

Her mind worked furiously. Her publisher expected her back at the end of the week, but the sketches she was working on were well on the way to completion and could be left for a further two or three days. Considering the number of rooms in the house, she thought another week would suffice and Michael could surely be placated for that length of time. Besides, he was busy, and no doubt he would have little time to miss her.

She thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her trousers. It was an exciting prospect and one which she couldn't wait to put into operation.

With determination, she went downstairs and rang the receptionist's bell. The girl came through from the back room and smiled when she saw who it was.

'Is it your bill you're after?' she inquired, rummaging through some papers on the desk.

Melanie's brow clouded for a moment. 'No,' she de­clared firmly. 'I - I wanted to let you know that I have decided to stay for a further week.'

The girl looked up in surprise. 'A week, Miss Stewart? But your car's just been delivered outside! I understood from Sean that you'd be leaving in the morning.'

Melanie compressed her lips. She would not allow her­self to be angered, not row.

'Well, I'm afraid Mr. Bothwell made a mistake,' she stated clearly. 'I've decided to stay on.'

The girl looked rather put out. 'Then I shall have to ask Sean if it's all right,' she said, rather shortly.

Melanie heaved a deep breath. 'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, you do that. And by the way, you can also tell him that if he finds it impossible to allow me to stay on then I shall probably take up residence at Monkshood!'

CHAPTER FOUR

Melanie dressed with care for dinner that evening. For some reason she wished to show Scan Bothwell that his irritability did not trouble her in the least, and she in­tended to maintain an air of indifference when next she was in his presence.

Her gown was made of wine-coloured velvet, long and straight, moulding her breasts with deliberate emphasis before falling in concealing folds about her ankles. Her hair, parted in the centre to fall softly against her cheeks, gave her rather a demure air and as she wore little make­up the clear lucid violet of her eyes was all the more pronounced.

Satisfied with her appearance, she made her way down to the dining-room and was pleasantly cheered by the admiring glances the two old men sent in her direction. Ian Macdonald got up from his seat by the fire at her entrance, and said:

'Helen tells us you've decided to stay on for a few days.'

'Helen?' Melanie frowned. 'Oh, is that what the recep­tionist is called? Yes, yes, I'm staying for about another week.'

'What made you change your mind?' inquired Elizabeth Sullivan, with interest. 'Mr. Bothwell said you were only staying a couple of days.'

Melanie just managed not to show any emotion. 'I sup­pose I must like it here,' she replied carefully. 'Is - is it still snowing?'

It was not, the sky was bright and clear for the first

time since she left Fort William the day before, but the question successfully changed the subject and when Alaister brought up the possibilities of a hard frost cover­ing the loch, Melanie's reasons for remaining at Cairnside were forgotten.

When dinner was over Melanie decided to go into the bar lounge. She had had nothing stronger to drink than coffee since leaving London, and the idea of a liqueur after her meal was appealing.

The bar lounge opened from the reception hall and was almost empty she saw as she entered. As with the rest of the hotel, it was tastefully decorated and furnished with a curved bar of polished wood strung with multi-coloured lights. The bartender was a young man she had not seen before, and it was quite a relief to see another youthful face. Melanie smiled and perched on a stool by the bar asking for Chartreuse.

The young man turned to get her drink and then push­ing it across to her, he said: 'You're Miss Stewart, aren't you?'

Melanie nodded, cupping her chin on one hand. 'Yes,' she said curiously, 'who are you?'

'Jeffrey Bothwell,' he replied at once. 'Sean's brother.'

'Oh!' Melanie was nonplussed for a moment. 'I - I didn't realize he had a brother...'

'Why should you? You've only been here since yester­day, haven't you, and I was off duty last night. I've been staying overnight with friends and only got back at lunchtime.'

Melanie twisted the glass in her hands rather specu­latively. 'I didn't use the bar last night,' she admitted, and then looked up. 'Do you like working in the hotel?'

'It's okay. It's only a part-time occupation as far as I'm

concerned. I'm at college in Glasgow, but as I'm on hol­iday at the moment I lend a hand.' He picked up a glass and began to polish it. 'The hotel is quite a family con­cern. I suppose you've met my sister too.'

'Your sister?'

Yes, Helen, She's usually on the reception desk.'

'Oh, yes, of course.' Melanie was surprised.

Jeffrey put down the glass he had been polishing and picked up another. 'We all do our share,' he went on. 'The hotel is Sean's now, of course. He's the eldest son.'

'The eldest son!'

Melanie could not suppress the incredulous echo of his statement, and even as she said the words she became aware that they were no longer alone at the bar. A man had come to join them, a tall, dark man looking sleek and immaculate and more saturnine than ever in a dinner suit and a brilliantly white shirt.

'Good evening, Miss Stewart,' he said politely, coming to stand beside her. 'I understand you left a message for me with Helen.'

Melanie had to force herself to remain where she was when all her senses urged her to put as much distance as possible between herself and Sean Bothwell. It was im­possible for her not to be aware of his disturbing per­sonality, particularly as he chose to regard her with unconcealed appraisal, his strange light eyes insolently assessing the qualities of her gown and resting for a long moment on the creamy whiteness of her throat rising from the round neckline. She found herself looking at him, attempting to challenge his confidence in a similar manner, but the powerful width of his shoulders and the latent strength of his thigh muscles straining against the expensive cloth of his suit simply caused the hot colour to stain her cheeks yet again and aroused the most un-

comfortable sensations inside her.

With confused haste, she lifted her drink and swal­lowed a large mouthful, almost choking herself in the process. He waited until she was composed again, out­wardly if not inwardly, and then said: 'Helen tells me you have decided to stay on for a further week.'

Melanie was forced to look at him again. 'That's right,' she agreed carefully. 'Providing my arrangements don't clash with yours.'

Bothwell's eyes narrowed, and to her annoyance he seated himself on the stool adjoining hers. 'What ar­rangements do I have?' he queried rather mockingly, and Melanie's fingers tightened convulsively round the stem of her glass.

He was for some reason determined to disconcert her, and she did not care for it. She preferred his arrogant ebullience to this more dangerous side of him. Perhaps he had realized that by bullying her he was getting nowhere and had chosen instead to use other methods to get her to leave.

Jeffrey moved away to attend to two men who had just entered the lounge and they were left alone, much to Melanie's chagrin. She sipped her drink and concentrated hard on the lights behind the bar, but she was aware of his regard the whole time and she wished he would go away and attend to his other guests and leave her alone. With angry determination, she turned on him and said: 'Exactly what are you waiting for, Mr. Bothwell? I've told you what I told Helen. Surely there's nothing more to say?'

Bothwell was resting his back against the bar, his elbows supporting him on the bar itself. He looked com­pletely at his ease and it infuriated her.

'I thought we might talk,' he said, tipping his head on

one side and regarding her intently.

Melanie frowned. 'What about?'

'Our relationship, perhaps. Or maybe Monkshood.'

Melanie bent her head. You wouldn't talk about it earlier, why should you suddenly want to talk about it now?'

He narrowed his eyes, and she was again struck by the length of his lashes. 'Maybe I'm only just beginning to realize what a determined young woman you are, Miss Stewart.' He swung round in his seat and resting his elbows on the bar he cupped his chin in his hands. 'Well?' he said. 'What do you say?'

Melanie bit her lip. She was torn between the desire to get as far away from this disturbing man as possible and the equally strong desire to try and make him understand her feelings about Monkshood. After all, they should not be enemies, not when there was absolutely no reason for them to be so. Only a small nagging doubt about the advisability of her spending much time with Bothwell caused her to hesitate. But finally she said: 'Very well, let's talk about Monkshood. Maybe we could come to some kind of compromise after all.'

Bothwell slid off his stool. 'Not here,' he said. 'I prefer to do my talking in private.'

Melanie's eyes widened. 'Oh, but - I don't think—

'Come now, Miss Stewart, surely you're not afraid of having a drink alone with me!' He swung round the end of the bar. 'What is your particular poison? Whisky? Rum? Brandy? Gin?'

'Nothing, thank you.' Melanie was uneasy now.

'Oh, come now, you must like something.' Bothwell's smile was slightly crooked. 'Surely a small whisky with dry ginger would be acceptable?'

Melanie heaved a sigh. 'I'm rather tired, Mr. Bothwell.

Perhaps we should save our talk until some other time ...'

Bothwell halted in front of her, a bottle of whisky and two small bottles of dry ginger in his hands. 'Are you afraid of me, Miss Stewart?' he inquired, softly and challengingly.

Melanie finished the Chartreuse. 'Of course not.'

'Good! Then shall we go?'

He indicated that she should precede him out of the bar and they emerged into the reception hall. Someone had left the outer door open and a chill wind was blowing through the lobby door into the hall. Bothwell stood the whisky and the two bottles of ginger on the reception desk and went to close the door, while Melanie stood shiv­ering, as much with apprehension as cold.

When he came back, he gave a sardonic smile at the doubtful look in Melanie's eyes. 'I thought you might run out on me,' he murmured. 'You had the chance.'

'Oh, please, Mr. Bothwell, stop trying to play cat and mouse with me,' she exclaimed. 'I'm sure you're a very experienced adversary, but games do not amuse me!'

'Do they not, Miss Stewart? You disappoint me. I thought all fashionable young women enjoyed verbal forays into masculine territory.'

Melanie glanced round. 'Where are you taking me?' she asked, refusing to be drawn.

Bothwell walked round the reception desk, picked up the bottles and pressing a hand on the handle of the door behind the desk, he pushed it open. 'Just here, Miss Stew­art,' he said calmly. 'Would you like to come round?'

He stood beside the opened door until she came round and preceded him into a room that was lit by firelight. She glanced round nervously as he closed the door, but he did nothing more alarming than to stand down the bottles he was carrying and switch on a tall standard lamp that filled the room with a golden glow.

It was a comfortable room, small and neat, with the trappings of an office allied to less businesslike fittings. Apart from the desk and a couple of filing cabinets, there were two deep armchairs made of dark red leather, slightly worn but obviously comfortable, and a rather old-fashioned divan, upholstered in green velvet and pos­sessing a scrolled headrest at one end. There were plenty of papers strewn about the desk, but there was a kind of ordered disorder about them, and the only incongruity was the telephone, which was discordantly modern.

Melanie hovered in the centre of the room feeling the embracing warmth from the blazing logs in the hearth while Sean Bothwell found some glasses in a small cabinet and opened the bottle of whisky. He poured a small measure of whisky into one glass and a more generous measure into another, and then adding ginger to the first he handed it to Melanie. Melanie took the glass re­luctantly and stood uncertainly while Bothwell walked round her to the fire.

'Sit down,' he said, indicating one of the armchairs, and took half his drink in one gulp.

Melanie hesitated, and then did as he suggested, but she stood her glass down on the mantelshelf beside her and did not touch the spirit inside it.

Bothwell finished his drink and walked lazily across to pour himself another. 'Tell me,' he said when he turned with his glass in his hand, 'what kind of price would you think Monkshood would fetch on the open market?'

Melanie was taken aback. 'I don't know,' she said, shrugging. 'Not a lot, I shouldn't think.'

'Five thousand?'

Melanie frowned. 'Perhaps, although I think that's a

trifle generous. I thought maybe - four thousand.

'Hymn.' Bothwell considered the whisky in his glass for a moment and then threw half of it to the back of his throat again. 'Four thousand, eh?' He studied her glass again. 'So if someone offered you - say - eight thousand for it, you would consider it a generous offer?'

Melanie stared at him incredulously. 'Eight thousand!' she exclaimed. 'No one would offer eight thousand for Monkshood!'

'I would.'

'What!' She was astounded now. 'You can't be serious.'

'Oh, but I am.' Bothwell regarded her intently. 'That's why I invited you in here. I wanted to put this prop­osition to you.'

Melanie lifted down her whisky and sipped it hastily. She felt she needed the sustenance it would give. She couldn't believe her ears. Bothwell was offering her eight thousand for a house that wasn't worth half that price!

She drained her glass and was holding it absently in her hands when he lifted it from her and taking it away filled it again. She took it automatically, but did not immedi­ately raise it to her lips.

'But why do you want Monkshood?' she said, at last. 'I mean - there must be other houses in the district you could buy. Why do you want Monkshood ?'

'I have my reasons,' he returned shortly, finishing his second whisky. 'Monkshood is convenient, and it is the only house in the neighbourhood of any size. At least, it's the only one that's empty!'

Melanie swallowed hard. 'You're making it very difficult for me, Mr. Bothwell.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't want to sell Monkshood.'

'Oh, for God's sake!' Bothwell smote his forehead with his fist. 'Why? With eight thousand pounds you could buy yourself a country cottage near London, far more suited to your requirements than Monkshood.'

Melanie sipped her second drink, choosing her words carefully. 'You don't understand, Mr. Bothwell. I like the house, I like the area. I told you - I don't want to live near London.'

'You're crazy!' he muttered violently, turning to pour himself another drink. 'What can Monkshood possibly mean to you?'

Melanie rose to her feet unsteadily. 'It means some­where I can call my own for the first time in my life!' she said fiercely.

'But any house would do!' exclaimed Bothwell im­patiently. 'You haven't been here long enough to form any especial attachment for the place! If I were to tell you tomorrow that that wasn't Monkshood, and introduce you to some new building, you wouldn't even notice'

'Yes, I would,' she said quickly. 'Look, you have a family - brothers and sisters around you - I have no one. My parents are dead and I was an only child! To me, Monkshood represents a link with the past, with my mother, if you like. At least it belonged to someone who was related to me, no matter how remotely!'

'Sentimental drivel!' he snapped angrily. 'I've never heard such nonsense in all my life! And do you suppose your inestimable fiance with his fashionable London practice is going to fall in with your wishes concerning a house in the Highlands miles from any sophisticated kind of civilization?'

Melanie was trembling now. 'Michael may not want to live in Scotland, I'm quite prepared to accept that, but that doesn't mean I have to sell the house. We could quite

easily use it for holidays and things—'

'And the rest of the year it stands empty,' he snapped.

'Yes. And that was what I wanted to talk to you about. I was going to suggest a compromise where we both might share the—'

'Oh, spare me that, please!' he muttered savagely. 'I don't want your compromise. I want Monkshood, and by God, I mean to get it!'

On shaking legs, Melanie brushed past him and open­ing the door emerged into the reception hall. It was much cooler out here, but she didn't notice, her checks were burning and so was the rest of her. How could she have imagined she might reason with that man? He was im­possible, absolutely impossible!

Leaving her half empty glass on the reception desk, she made her way upstairs and in the sanctuary of her room she sank down on the bed weakly. Always after leaving Bothwell she felt as limp as a rag, and this time was no exception. He had the power to reduce all her arguments to a childish attempt at being adult, and no one, not even Michael with his shrewd legal brain, had been able to do that.

Switching out the light, she walked across to her windows and drew back the curtains, looking out on the frosty scene before the hotel. Stars gleamed in a sky as black as pitch, the snow illuminating the bulk of the mountains all around. It was as well enclosed spaces did not trouble her, she thought, for the mountains had a claustrophobic quality about them tonight, or maybe it was simply the memory of what had just occurred that made her feel that way. In any event, she was very near to tears and there was no convincing reason for that that she wanted to think about.

Next morning, everything seemed brighter, of course. The snow was still keeping off and the air was sharp and crisp. After breakfast Melanie dressed in warm clothes and went out to examine her car. She had taken a cursory look at it the previous day after its return, but this morn­ing she was determined to start the engine and ensure that it was still roadworthy.

She was pressing the ignition uselessly when Jeffrey Bothwell emerged from the hotel. He was wearing a red parka and dark pants, his dark hair curling slightly in the wind, and she thought for a moment that it was Sean Bothwell, but then she realized it was not. They were not really much alike except that they were both dark. She climbed out of the car and said:

'Do you know anything about engines?'

Jeffrey strolled across to her. 'Having trouble?'

'You could say that,' she agreed rather sarcastically.

Jeffrey grinned. 'Open up the bonnet. I'll take a look.'

Melanie got back into the car and pulled the lever which released the bonnet and Jeffrey lifted it. Then he peered inside with an assumed air of confidence. Melanie stood about, stamping her feet to restore warmth to them, waiting patiently for his verdict.

'The points are damp,' he said at last. 'Sean said the car stood out overnight in a drift, is that right?'

'Yes, I m afraid so.'

'Well, the dampness has invaded the engine,' said Jeffrey. You'll have to wait for a bit of sun to dry it out. Maybe by tomorrow it will be okay. But if you keep on pressing the ignition you'll ruin the battery.'

'Thank you!' Melanie slammed down the bonnet and stood impatiently, biting her lips.

'What's wrong? Did you want to use it?' 'Of course.' Melanie glanced speculatively at the Range-Rover standing beside her small saloon. 'I wanted to go down to the village for some things.'

Jeffrey hunched his shoulders. 'Well, don't look at me. I don't have any transport.'

'Don't you?' Melanie sighed. 'Don't you drive?'

'Oh, yes, of course. But if you're thinking I might borrow the Rover think again! Scan wouldn't let me take it.'

Melanie heaved another sigh. 'I see. Do you think he would let me borrow it?'

'No one borrows the Range-Rover!' stated Jeffrey dampeningly. 'You'll just have to walk. It's not far.'

'It's not the distance,' explained Melanie. 'It's the things I want to get. I expect they'll be heavy to carry all that way.'

'Why? What are you going to buy?'

Melanie bit her lip. 'Well, some paint for a start. And some cleaning equipment.'

'Paint? Cleaning equipment!' Jeffrey was obviously nonplussed, and just at that moment the sports car Mel­anie had seen Jennifer Craig driving the day before came smoothly up the road to the hotel.

Jennifer brought the car to a halt beside them and climbed out smiling agreeably. 'Hi there,' she said. 'You two look glum! What's wrong?'

Melanie managed a smile. 'My car won't start,' she said. 'Mr. Bothwell says the points are damp.'

'Oh, Jeffrey, please!' exclaimed Jeffrey, grinning. 'Are you mechanically minded, Jennie?'

Jennifer laughed. 'No, not particularly,' she admit­ted.

Dressed today in a tweed skirt and a fur jacket, thick brogues on her feet, she looked more ungainly than ever, but she had a nice personality and Melanie decided she liked her.

'Maybe I can help, though,' Jennifer went on now. 'Where do you want to go?'

Melanie bit her lip. 'That's awfully kind of you, Miss Craig, but I just wanted to get some things from the vil­lage, that's all.'

Jennifer patted the bonnet of her car. 'Okay, hop in! I'll take you.'

'Hey, what about me!' exclaimed Jeffrey, and Melanie wondered whether he had had some appointment with Jennifer himself.

Jennifer raised her eyebrows. 'It's only a two-seater, Jeffrey,' she pointed out. 'Besides, you're not wanting to go to the village, are you?'

Jeffrey hunched his shoulders. 'No,' he admitted.

'There you are, then! We'll be back directly. Go and ask Josie to make you some coffee. I'm sure she'd be de­lighted to oblige.'

Jeffrey made a playful menacing movement towards her and with a laughing squeal, Jennifer climbed into the car, thrusting open the nearside door for Melanie.

Melanie gave Jeffrey a rueful look and then got into the sports car beside the other girl. The engine roared to life, and with a flurry of slush under the rear wheels, the car moved away.

Jennifer drove smoothly and expertly, rather like Sean Bothwell, Melanie thought, casting about in her mind for something to say. However, Jennifer beat her to it, asking casually:

'Do you need a lot of things in the village? I must warn you, apart from the general stores and post office there's very little in the way of shops.'

Melanie smiled at her. 'Actually, the general stores

should suit me fine,' she said. 'I just need some cleaning fluids and cloths; tilings like that. Oh, and some emulsion paint!'

Jennifer glanced at her quickly. 'Pardon me for being curious, but are these things for Monkshood?'

Melanie sighed. 'Yes.'

Jennifer shrugged. 'Good,' she remarked sur­prisingly.

Melanie's eyes widened. 'Don't you mind? I mean - I should have thought - that is—' She halted uncertainly, aware that by saying anything she was assuming too much.

But Jennifer seemed not at all put out. "You think be­cause Sean wants Monkshood that I would frown on you doing anything to improve its appearance, is that it?' And at Melanie's nod, she went on: 'You couldn't be more wrong. I've wanted to clean the place out several times, but Sean wouldn't let me. I think it's a wonderful idea.'

Melanie relaxed. 'Thank goodness for that! I felt that by accepting your offer of a lift I was doing so under false pretences.'

Jennifer shook her head. 'Don't be silly. I'm glad to help. I expect your own car will be working again by tomorrow. Have you decided how long you're staying?'

'Well, actually, I'm hoping to stay until Monkshood is reasonably habitable,' replied Melanie. 'I thought perhaps a week...'

'I see,' Jennifer nodded.

They were approaching the village now and Melanie could see it was very small. There was a main street, lined with narrow houses and a small school, a church and the one or two shops Jennifer had mentioned. To the left of the main street, through gaps in the houses, Melanie had her first real glimpse of Loch Cairnross, and she was interested when Jennifer pointed out her own home across the stretch of water.

'You ought to have come here in summer,' Jennifer commented, with a sigh. 'Then we can swim and water- ski, and Scan has a dinghy.'

Melanie compressed her lips. She would like to have said that she hoped to come to Monkshood at all tunes of the year, but it would have seemed ungracious somehow, in spite of what Jennifer had said.

The woman who kept the general stores was very help­ful, and although she was obviously curious to know who Melanie was and why she wanted such things as scouring powders and emulsion paint Jennifer's presence re­strained her from asking too many pertinent questions.

Both girls were loaded with packages as they made their way back to the car, and Melanie, laughing over a box of detergent, exclaimed: 'I don't know how I should have managed without your help. Thanks again.'

Jennifer shook her head deprecatingly. 'It's nothing!' she exclaimed. 'Actually, I'm quite enjoying myself. It always amuses me when Mrs. MacPherson is put at a loss for words. She was absolutely dying to know why you, a visitor to the place, should be buying cleaning agents. She'll probably spread it round the village that Sean's hotel is in such a state that you're having to clean your room yourself!'

Melanie gasped, 'Oh, you can't be serious!'

Jennifer laughed. 'No, perhaps not. Ah, here we are.' She opened the car door as she spoke. 'Just dump every­thing in the back. We can unpack them at the house.'

'The house?' Melanie frowned as she slid into her seat.

Jennifer nodded. 'Of course. We might as well drop them off at Monkshood. You don't want to have to carry

them back again yourself, do you?'

'Why, no!' Melanie bit her lip. 'But won't - Mr. Both- well - mind?'

'So what if he does!' Jennifer shrugged and started the car. 'He's not my keeper, you know.'

Melanie was tempted to ask exactly what their re­lationship actually was, but like Mrs. MacPherson, Jenni­fer's attitude restrained her. Instead, she thought ahead with pleasure to the enjoyment she would get out of cleaning the old house.

The gate stood wide, and Jennifer drove straight up the drive to Monkshood, halting at the front door.

'Do you have the keys?' she asked suddenly.

'The keys?' Melanie felt in her pockets. 'Oh, yes,' she said, bringing out the bunch of keys Sean Bothwell had left on the kitchen table the day before and which she had thrust into her pocket. 'Yes, here they are. Do you know which one opens the front door?'

'T.et me see.' Jennifer climbed out of the car taking the keys with her and Melanie followed suit, removing her fur hat as she did so. Jennifer seemed to find the right key fairly easily, and the door swung inwards on creaking hinges.

'Eerie, isn't it?' commented Jennifer wryly, as she turned back to help Melanie retrieve the parcels from the back of the car. 'Old Angus wouldn't spend a penny on the place that he didn't think was absolutely necessary. The house would have had to have been falling about his ears before he would have bothered having anyone spring clean it.' She sighed. 'Mind you, he was practically bed­ridden for the last couple of years of his life, so I don't suppose you could really blame him.'

'Was he?' Melanie was intrigued. T)o go on. Tell me about him. I know very little really.'

As they unloaded the car, carrying the packages through to pile them on the kitchen table, Jennifer kept up a commentary about Melanie's mother's cousin. She explained how he had been born at Monkshood, and had lived there all his life apart from the period during the Second World War when he had been at sea.

'He was in the Navy, you see,' Jennifer went on. 'And from all accounts he was quite a lady's man. My father said he looked marvellous in his uniform. I suppose he must have done, really ...' Her voice trailed away, and Melanie looked at her rather curiously.

'Why?' she asked.

Jennifer pressed her lips together and shrugged. 'Oh, nothing. Are these all the parcels there are?'

Melanie sighed. 'Yes. I've just brought in the last three.'

Jennifer nodded almost regretfully and looked up at the kitchen ceiling reflectively, saying: 'Which room are you going to start first?'

'I thought in here,' replied Melanie, drawing her thoughts back to the job in hand. 'It seems the most logi­cal place for me. I suppose an expert would say I ought to start at the top of the house and work my way down, but I want the kitchen straight so that I can put the heating on. Do you know how to light this stove?'

Jennifer walked across to the huge range and regarded it critically. 'Oh, yes,' she said, nodding. 'We used to have one of these years ago. I guess I could manage to light it okay.' Then, as though inspired, she exclaimed: 'I say, I don't suppose you would like me to help, would you? I mean - two pairs of hands are bound to be quicker than one, and I could tackle all the jobs you didn't have time to do—'

Melanie stared at her. 'Heavens,' she cried, 'your

parents or - Bothwell - would never allow you to help me here! It would be purely manual labour!'

Jennifer laughed. 'I'm not afraid of hard work. Like you, I'd gain a great deal of satisfaction from making this place attractive again.'

Melanie spread her hands. 'But - but—'

'But - nothing!' Jennifer smiled. 'Do you want my as­sistance or don't you?'

'Of course I do.' Melanie made an involuntary gesture. 'I'd be glad of your company above anything else. It is lonely here, and eerie, as you've said.'

'Very well then. You leave Sean and my parent to me. I'll talk them round.' She glanced at her watch. 'It's only a little after eleven, why don't we make a start now?' She began removing her gloves. 'And by the way, my name's Jennie, and I know yours is Melanie. I think surnames are so square, don't you?'

Melanie nodded helplessly. 'I don't know what to say,' she began smilingly.

'Then don't say anything,' advised Jennifer briskly. 'Just get started!'

It was amazing what could be achieved in quite a short time. While Jennifer tackled the cleaning of the stove, Melanie rummaged in cupboards and came up with a couple of buckets which she washed out preparatory to using. Then she took off her outer clothes and after drag­ging the kitchen table across the room, set about washing the ceiling with liquid detergent. It was a tiring task, re­quiring as it did the continued upward lifting of her arms, and Jennifer looked up at her ruefully as she finished washing down the outer walls of the range.

'I think I've got the easiest job,' she remarked, wiping her dirty hands on an old rag. 'Shall I give you a hand, or do you want the stove lighting?'

Melanie's arms dropped to her sides. 'I can manage this,' she asserted firmly. 'And if you can find something with which to light the boiler I'd be very grateful. I'm sweating now, but it's jolly cold in here, actually.'

Jennifer nodded, getting to her feet and looking round thoughtfully. 'I don't know where I'm going to find any dry sticks,' she said. 'Any wood lying around here is bound to be damp. I think I'd accomplish the job much quicker if I went down to the village and bought some fresh sticks.'

Melanie bit her lip. 'What a nuisance! I didn't think about that.'

Jennifer grinned. 'Never mind. I don't. I'll just rinse my fingers and then I'll go.'

While she was away, Melanie climbed down from the table to get some fresh water and while her bucket was filling she looked up critically at what she had achieved. Already that part of the ceiling that she had washed was beginning to look respectable again, and once she had coated it with some white emulsion it would look really clean. Of course, it was difficult using only cold water, and her fingers were chilled to the bone, but once Jennifer got the stove going it would heat the water for them.

She heard the sound of Jennifer's car coming back up the drive and walked into the hall to meet her. However, when Jennifer opened the outer door Melanie could tell at once from her expression that something was wrong.

'What is it—?' she was beginning anxiously, when another figure appeared in the doorway behind the girl. Even before Melanie could distinguish his face in the gloomy hallway, she sensed who it was, and her heart sank to the pit of her stomach.

Jennifer grimaced helplessly at her and then said re­signedly : 'Sean's been looking for me. We met in the vilIage.'

'I see.' Melanie wet her suddenly dry lips with her tongue. 'Hello, Mr. Bothwell, have you come to see how we're getting on?'

Sean Bothwell brushed past Jennifer to glare angrily at Melanie. 'I am not interested in what you are doing, Miss Stewart, only in the way you have deliberately involved Jennifer—'

'Sean, I explained—' Jennifer began, catching his arm helplessly.

'Leave this to me, Jennifer!' he snapped, and shook off her restraining fingers.

'Well, Miss Stewart? You knew I was opposed to your attempting to renovate the house and so you thought if you involved Jennifer you might stand a chance of media­tion, is that it?'

Melanie's eyes widened. 'I need no mediator, Mr. Both- well!' she retorted. 'Monkshood is my concern, and if I choose to renovate it, I don't need your approval—'

'I warn you, Miss Stewart—'

'Sean, please' Jennifer came between them. 'This is ridiculous! If you're worried about me, then come right out and say so, don't use other reasons—'

He turned to her swiftly, his dark brows descending over those light eyes. 'Of course I worry about you!' he exclaimed huskily. 'How could I do otherwise? Even so,' he glanced back at Melanie, 'I do not care for Miss Stew­art's methods!'

Jennifer slid her arm through his. 'Darling, don't be silly! The house can only benefit from anything Miss Stew­art docs to it. Now, can I light the stove and be done with it?'

'No!' Sean was adamant, and Jennifer, although she pressed her lips together a trifle regretfully, seemed perfectly willing to accept this adjuration. She smiled wist­fully at Melanie, and said:

'I'm sorry, Melanie. I did want to help.'

Melanie clenched her fists, suppressing the sense of injustice that was rising inside her.

'That's all right, Jennie,' she replied briefly. 'I quite understand.'

'I doubt you do,' observed Scan Bothwell dourly, and ushering Jennifer before him he left the house, slamming the heavy old door behind them.

CHAPTER FIVE

Melanie found it incredibly difficult to work after they had gone. Apart from anything else she was cold, whereas earlier she had been warm and fired with enthusiasm into the bargain. Suddenly, everything had gone flat, and she flung down the cloth she had been using and reached for her sheepskin coat. Before doing anything else she would get the boiler going and nothing was going to stop her from doing what she had planned.

But it was easier said than done. Whether or not Jenni­fer had bought any wood Melanie did not know; she only knew she had not brought any into the house and there­fore she had nothing with which to start the fire.

With determination Melanie left the house and walked as quickly as she could down the road to the village. What had been a momentary passage in the car was quite a walk on such an icy surface, the sudden change to fine weather bringing with it a drop in the temperature.

The woman at the village store eyed her strangely when she asked for sticks or firelighters.

'Miss - er - Craig was in a while back buying just such a thing,' she observed, with obvious curiosity. 'I under­stood they were for you.'

Melanie managed a faint smile. 'I need some more,' she said calmly, more calmly than she felt. 'Do you mind?'

The woman shrugged and turned to collect a polythene bag of kindling. 'There you are, then.'

'Thank you.' Melanie paid for them and without en­lightening her further she left the shop and trudged up the road to the house. She was trying not to speculate on

Sean Bothwell's reasons for objecting so strongly to Jenni­fer helping her, but the remembrance of his angry face was not so easy to dismiss. She found his solicitude towards the other girl at once comprehensible and dis­turbing. What was his involvement with Jennifer? Did he love her? He certainly acted that way. And if he did had it been his intention to take his bride to Monkshood?

She shook her head helplessly. If that were so, she should be able to sympathize with his frustration, but she could not.

She turned between the drive gates and began to walk up to the house. But as she did so a curl of smoke drifted past her nose followed swiftly by another ... and another. Her eyes widened and she looked up towards the roof to see that there was smoke coming from one of the chim­neys. A sense of excitement gripped her, and she began to run towards the door. She burst into the hall, calling: 'Jennie! Jennie, I'm back!' only to be confronted by an empty house.

Frowning, she closed the front door, leaning back against it in bewilderment for a moment before walking slowly down the hall to the kitchen. In her absence, some­one had lit the stove and a red glow emanated from the perspex slits that enabled one to see the condition of the fire. She stared at the red glow with concentrated per­plexity and then shaking her head put down the bag she was carrying and leaned rather weakly against the table.

There was something rather unnerving about the whole affair and she felt a tremendous desire to leave the house there and then. But to do so would be to admit to ridiculous flights of fancy, and she had never been the hysterical type. So instead she removed her coat again and took up her cleaning of the ceiling.

However, her watch informed her that it was almost lunch time and she only spent another fifteen minutes at her task before getting down from the table and rubbing her hands clean on a duster. Tentatively, she opened the door of the stove and saw that the initial blaze had died down and more fuel was needed. The back door was not locked, she found, so whoever had lit the stove must have gone outside for fuel, she thought.

The fuel store was near the back door and she gathered several shovels-full of coke and banked the fire up again. This done, she felt quite pleased with herself and secured the back door before walking down the hall to leave by the front entrance.

However, as she reached out to open the front door the shadow of a man appeared outside silhouetted against the fluted glass of the door panels.

Melanie could not suppress the gasp of surprise that escaped her at that unexpected appearance and for a moment she hung back, unwilling to be seen. She couldn't imagine who it might be, unless Jeff had come looking for her.

Summoning her courage, she stepped forward again, but as she did so the door handle turned and the door was thrust inwards. Melanie took a step backwards and then felt an overwhelming sense of relief as she recognized her visitor.

Sean Bothwell stood just inside the doorway surveying her impatiently. 'You look rather pale, Miss Stewart. I shouldn't have thought working in sub-zero temperatures was good for you, not when you're used to the comforts of life, as you so pointedly remarked.'

Melanie buttoned her coat under her chin with slightly unsteady fingers. 'I have not been working in sub-zero temperatures, Mr. Bothwell. Someone has lit the stove, for which I'm most grateful.'

He raised his dark eyebrows. 'Even so, it will take more than half a morning to take the chill off this mauso­leum!'

'Agreed,' Melanie smiled sweetly. 'That's why I've just built the fire up to last all afternoon.'

He shrugged. 'You intend to come back here this after­noon?'

'Why not?'

'There's a blizzard blowing up the glen. The forecast is not good. If I were you, I would stay in the hotel for the rest of the day.'

Melanie gave an impatient gesture. 'But you're not me, Mr. Bothwell. I'm hardly likely to get snowed up here, am I? Only a hundred yards from the hotel!'

He shrugged. 'As you wish, Miss Stewart.'

Melanie made a movement towards the door and he stepped back politely to allow her to pass him. As she did so, she hesitated, very much aware of the bulk of his body and the disturbing awareness of those light eyes. 'Tell me,' she said tentatively, 'why did you let Jennifer come back and light the stove after all?'

He looked down at her intently. 'Do you think I did?'

'What do you mean?' Melanie caught her breath in her throat.

'Exactly what I say. To be blunt, Jennifer did not light the stove.'

Melanie frowned. 'Well, if she didn't, who did?' Her eyes flickered over his, and then moved away abruptly as her pulses began to pound in a most annoying way. She wet her lips with her tongue, and said: 'I'm sorry, I should have guessed, of course. You lit the stove.'

'Did I?' He shrugged his broad shoulders. 'Now why would I do a thing like that? Particularly after you went against my express wishes in coming here.'

Melanie tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear absently. 'You're just teasing me,' she said tautly. 'Excuse me! Lunch will be ready, and I've got to get back to the hotel.'

Bothwell leaned against the newel post of the door. 'Maybe old Angus lit the stove for you,' he observed wryly. 'There are some in the village who swear blind they've seen smoke coming from the chimneys since he died.'

Melanie stared at him angrily. 'Oh, Mr. Bothwell,' she said, clenching her fists fiercely, 'you're determined to prevent me from coming here, aren't you? Well, let me tell you something - I'm not afraid of supernatural hap­penings, nor do I believe that the stove ignited by super­natural means. You lit that stove, Mr. Bothwell, and nothing you can say or do will convince me otherwise!'

Bothwell straightened. 'I did not light the stove, Miss Stewart. You have my word on that.'

Melanie stared at him for a moment longer and then biting her lips she turned away, walking swiftly towards the gate. She would not allow him to intimidate her in this way, and not even when he shouted her name did she turn.

Instead, she almost ran to the hotel, and only when the maid placed a bunch of keys on her table with Mr. Both­well's compliments did she realize she had forgotten to lock the door of Monkshood.

In the event, she did not go to Monkshood again that day.

After lunch, she developed a severe migraine, brought on no doubt by the constant tipping back of her head as she washed the ceiling that morning, and she was forced to go to bed instead of returning to the old house. She told herself she was sorry she was not going back, but deep inside her she knew she was not at all. Somehow she had had enough upsets for one day.

As she was not hungry, she did not go down for dinner, and the young maid came to her door to inquire whether there was anything she needed. However, Melanie merely agreed to have some coffee and retired to bed soon after eight.

The next morning the expected blizzard arrived. By the time Melanie went down for breakfast, the wind was howling round the hotel and it was impossible to avoid draughts completely. Melanie ate a small meal, wonder­ing whether she ought to attempt to go to Monkshood in the teeth of the storm, and finally decided against it. In­stead, she spent the morning in the small lounge in front of a roaring fire playing cards with Ian MacDonald and Alaister. Alaister seemed to have lost some of his brusqueness towards her, or maybe he, like Ian, was curious to know her connection with Monkshood.

Whatever it was, they both plied her with questions about her immediate plans and Melanie found herself in difficulties trying to answer them sincerely. Apparently her answers satisfied them, however, for eventually the conversation veered round to the previous master of Monkshood and it was revealed that Alaister had known Angus Cairney for many years - since the second world war, in fact. He was quite expansive about Angus's rather isolated existence and told her that he used to play chess with the old man once a week.

'Sean was his only joy,' Ian volunteered once, and Mel­anie pondered the strange relationship they must have shared.

But she did not question him about this. Sean Both­well's affairs were no concern of hers and she would not like him to imagine that she was making inquisitive in­quiries into his private life, or the old man's either for that matter.

After lunch, the older guests retired for their rests and Melanie went to stand by the window of the dining-room looking out pensively. It was still snowing, but not so heavily, and the enforced inactivity was beginning to irri­tate her, knowing as she did that she had so little time to accomplish so much.

She decided she would go to Monkshood after all. Going upstairs, she dressed warmly and then came down­stairs again. As she left the hotel she encountered Jeffrey Bothwell and he frowned when he realized she intended going out.

'Surely you're not going driving in this!' he ex­claimed.

Melanie shook her head. 'No. I'm going to Monkshood. I can walk there quite easily.'

'Oh, yes, Monkshood,' Jeffrey nodded. Do you want some company?'

Melanie stared at him for a moment and then she bent her head. 'No - better not,' she replied. "Your - er - brother wouldn't like it. He doesn't approve of me work­ing there, and yesterday when he found Jennie was help­ing me he blew his top!'

'Ah, but that's a little different,' Jeffrey remarked, brushing snow from his heavy parka.

'How is it different?' Melanie frowned.

'Well, didn't Jennie tell you she's only recently re­covered from quite a severe attack of pleurisy? She's not a strong person, and I guess Sean was worried about her-'

Melanie gasped, 'But why didn't he say so? Why didn't she say so?' She hunched her shoulders. 'Good lord, I never dreamed—' She shook her head. 'I thought she was naturally pale.'

'Well, she is. As I've said, she's not the strongest person you could find, but at the moment she's supposed to take care of herself. I imagine when Sean found her at Monks­hood he was pretty angry.'

'You can say that again.' Melanie bit her lip. 'I thought it was just - awkwardness!'

'Well, I suppose you were within your rights to feel that way. I gather Sean hasn't been completely objective about the affair since you arrived.' Jeffrey sighed. 'It's a difficult situation.'

'I know.' Melanie tucked a strand of hair inside her fur hat. 'But it was not of my making.'

'But you don't want to sell the house, I gather.'

'That's right,' Melanie nodded. 'I've never owned a house before.'

'I see.' Jeffrey tugged at his ear lobe. 'And what about my offer of assistance? Are you taking it up?'

Melanie hesitated. 'No,' she said slowly. 'No, not today, Jeffrey. Thanks all the same. Somehow, whatever you say, I don't think Sean would approve.'

'I don't always do the things Sean approves of,' ob­served Jeffrey dryly, but Melanie merely smiled re­gretfully at him and with a wave walked away across the hotel yard.

Monkshood lay under a blanket of snow, its stone walls caked with the flurries that an icy wind kept throwing against them. It looked bleak and lonely and more iso­lated than ever as the falling flakes provided a shield be­tween it and the outside world. She wondered why she wanted to hold on to the house so desperately. It was not because of its charm and beauty, that was certain, and yet to sell it and leave here, probably never to return, was becoming harder to consider as the days went by. A vague picture of Sean Bothwell's face swam before her eyes as she walked slowly up to the entrance. If she sold Monks­hood to him she would win his thanks and his gratitude and she would have the satisfaction of knowing that the old house belonged to its rightful owner. But the further speculation of imagining him bringing his wife to live there was not so acceptable to her and she could only assume that his arrogant attitude had aroused in her a desire to thwart such considered complacency.

The house did not strike her chillingly as it had done the day before and she could only guess that the stove had succeeded in destroying some of the dampness. However, when she walked through to the kitchen she found the stove still glowing merrily and the warmth there was con­siderable.

Melanie looked about her helplessly for evidence of who the stovekeeper might be, but only smudges of dampness on the floor bore witness to someone's journeys in and out to get the fuel. She sighed and shook her head, unbuttoning her coat reluctantly. It was tantalizing to have a mystery unsolved and she half wished she had accepted Jeffrey's company if nothing else.

Although the brilliance of the snow outside the kitchen window provided illumination she knew she would not be able to work for long as the electricity had been discon­nected when her cousin died. Jennifer had told her this, and also that Sean had turned off the water. The two girls had managed to turn the water on again, but the electri­city needed to be connected by the Electricity Board themselves, and somehow Melanie could not see them getting out here in weather like this.

The kitchen ceiling looked much better than it had and Melanie wondered whether she should put on a coat of emulsion before tackling anything else. Now that the room was looking cleaner and the stove was working the kitchen seemed a most desirable place to be and somehow she had no particular desire to leave it. The silence was almost unnerving and there was a ridiculous sense of se­curity to be gained from staying so near the outer door.

She stirred the paint and pushed the kitchen table across to the wall to begin. She had brought no overall, but the paint was non-drip and apart from splashing the ends of her fingers she managed quite well. Unconsciously she was listening the whole time, and although she knew that singing would have provided her with a little company, she was loathe to camouflage anyone's pro­posed intrusion.

The light was fading as she finished her task and climb­ing down looked up critically at her handiwork. She was pleased with her efforts and decided that with another coat over the first the ceiling would be really satis­factory.

She tidied up her things, rubbed her hands on a duster, and reached for her coat. She was smiling to herself as she did so, recalling the imagined horrors she had conjured up in her mind as she worked. There was nothing super­natural here. Someone, and even now she suspected Sean Bothwell, had lit the stove and had kindly kept it going for her. She ought to be feeling grateful, not apprehen­sive.

A sudden sound alerted her, and a creeping sense of unease came surging back into her mind. The noise had come from upstairs, and there was no earthly reason for any sound to come from there.

She stood in the middle of the kitchen floor, her spine tingling, her ears straining to catch the slightest sound. Had she been mistaken? Had it been the sound of the water gurgling in the cistern, or merely the expanding creak of a loose floorboard?

Then there was the unmistakable sound of footsteps crossing the upper floor and Melanie's legs turned to jelly beneath her. Her first instinct was to run out of the house before she heard anything else, but something told her that to do so would be silly and futile. If she left now, she would never be able to stand being here alone again, and after all, ghosts did not make such noisy treads, did they?

She tried to think logically. Someone was upstairs, someone who had no right to be there. This was her house and hers alone. Taking a deep breath, she opened the kitchen door and stepped out into the hall. The stairs stretched away ahead of her, dark and gloomy, and she looked up apprehensively.

'Who - who's there?' she called, in a voice which even to her ears sounded frail and frightened.

There was no reply, and she swallowed hard, hesitating about ascending the stairs. Placing one foot on the bottom stair, she called: 'Come down, whoever you are! If you don't I shall call the police!'

There was silence for a moment, and then footsteps sounded across the landing and a dark figure appeared at the head of the stairs. In the gloom, it was impossible to identify whether it was a man or a woman, and Melanie fell back a step, her hand pressed to her lips.

'Who - who is it?' she asked unsteadily, but no reply came.

With a little gasp Melanie's nerve failed. Turning, she darted back into the kitchen, running to the outer door wildly. Too late she remembered she had come in the

front way and the back door was still locked.

Fumbling in her pockets for the keys, she heard the heavy footsteps descending the stairs and she looked round desperately for something with which to defend herself. There was a panic-stricken expression on her face as she lifted one of the kitchen chairs and held it poised over her head as the kitchen door opened. Then she flung the chair furiously across the room so that the man enter­ing had to put up his hands to defend his head. The chair crashed unheeding against the wall and as it did so Mel­anie let out a gasp of rage.

'You - you swine!' she gulped, as she encountered Sean Bothwell's mocking expression. 'You - you—' She turned and reached for a canister of scouring powder and would have thrown that at him too had he not strode swiftly round the table between them and twisted her hands to her sides.

'Calm yourself!' he said, his expression impatient now.

Melanie struggled in his grasp, 'I will not calm myself,' she bit out angrily. 'You did that on purpose! You delib­erately came here to frighten me! Oh, you're despicable! I didn't think even you would sink so low—'

'Be silent!' His eyes glittered coldly like agates, and she ought to have been warned that she was going too far.

But Melanie was too tense, too hurt and frightened herself, to care what she was doing. 'I will not be silent! You can't intimidate me, Mr. Bothwell! I'll say what I like!'

A muscle jerked spasmodically in his cheek and looking up at him she was suddenly aware of how close to him she was. She was aware of him with every fibre of her being; of the tautness of his expression, of the muscled hardness of his body, of the cool firmness of the hands gripping her wrists so cruelly. She had never been aware of Michael in quite this way, or maybe it was that Michael appealed more to her mind than to her body, whereas this man's personality was an all-enveloping thing that demanded conscious thought. She knew she had tried him to the limit of his patience and there was little tolerance left in the grimness of his eyes, and yet the knowledge excited and not frightened her.

As though aware of her thoughts he looked down into her flushed face suddenly, his eyes lingering on the full lower lip of her mouth, and with an exclamation of dis­gust he put her from him, so that she stood rubbing her wrist painfully.

'I did not come here with the intention of frightening you,' he said grimly. 'Indeed, I thought you had left some time ago. However, I will admit that when I saw you hovering at the foot of the stairs, assuming an outrage you could not possibly defend, I allowed you to remain incognisant of my identity purposely.' lie flexed his shoulder muscles. 'I suggest you attempt to control your emotions a little more firmly. Then you might not be so inclined to indulge yourself in flights of fancy!' His eyes narrowed suddenly. 'In any direction!'

Melanie's eyes flickered upward at the implied insult. 'I don't know what you mean, Mr. Bothwell,' she re­torted.

'Don't you?' His eyes were derisive. 'Oh, I think you do, Miss Stewart. You're not the kind of woman to remain in ignorance of her undoubted physical charms, but in my experience an engagement constitutes some kind of a bond—'

'Exactly what are you implying?'

'Was 1 implying? I thought I was making myself pain­fully clear! You like the admiration of men, Miss Stewart,

and just now you thought you were arousing it in me—'

'How - how dare you?'

Melanie was unable to find words to express her indig­nation, and Sean Bothwell regarded her cynically. 'A man dares just as far as a woman permits him to!' he replied, 'and I would hazard a guess that you were disappointed when nothing happened.'

Melanie was trembling with outrage. 'I - I don't know how you have the nerve to stand there and say such things!' she gasped. 'You're flattering yourself if you ima­gine such an idea crossed my mind!'

She broke off abruptly as he suddenly reached out and grasped her forearms, dragging her roughly against him. His eyes blazed down into hers with unconcealed ferocity, and when his mouth took possession of hers it had none of the gentleness she was used to receiving from Michael. Indeed, Sean Bothwell bruised her lips with a violence that at once stimulated and yet terrified her. He was hurting her, the muscles of his thighs hard against her legs so that she was forced to cling to him and try desperately not to respond.

But it was difficult to remain indifferent to the hungry pressure of his mouth, and his hands in her hair had a seducing quality about them. It was as though the fusing of their mouths was bringing about a chemical change in their reactions to one another so that his lips softened to a passionate tenderness that disarmed her completely. Her hands slid up his chest to his neck, his skin warm and smooth under her fingers, his hair thick and vital to her touch. For a moment longer she resisted and then her arms slid round his neck and for a devastating few seconds she allowed herself to respond and felt the com­pelling urgency of his desire.

And then, as though coming to his senses, Sean thrust

her savagely away from him, a twisted expression mar­ring his attractive features.

'You bitch!' he swore violently. 'You don't care who you hurt, do you?'

Melanie swayed, grasping the table for support. 'And - and you do -1 suppose,' she stammered sickly.

He raked a hand through his hair. 'No,' he muttered grimly, 'no, for a few moments I allowed you to call the tune, but no more!' He fastened his coat closely about him. 'Stay away from me, Miss Stewart, or I may not be responsible for my actions next time!' And with that he turned and left the house.

CHAPTER SIX

It was incredibly difficult for Melanie to summon up enough courage to go down for dinner that evening. Al­though she knew there was absolutely no reason why she should meet Sean Bothwell she dreaded a casual en­counter. She dreaded seeing the cold contempt in his eyes when he looked at her and no matter how many times she told herself that what had happened had been as much his fault as hers she still came up against the wall of her own suspicion. Why had she taunted him like that? Why had she felt that almost tangible awareness of him? And worst of all, why had she allowed herself to respond to such a brutal attack?

At first she had found it incredible to believe that it had actually happened, hut later, in her room, with the evi­dence of her own bruised lips confronting her, she had had to accept that it was true. Even now, as she sat pick­ing desultorily at her meal, she could still feel the de­manding pressure of his body and experience again the sensual eruption of hitherto unexplored emotions.

As she pushed her plate aside, the maid approached her table and said: 'There's a telephone call for you, Miss Stewart From London.'

London!

Melanie looked up da2edly. Where do I take it?' she asked.

'In the kiosk in the hall, miss,' replied the maid politely. 'Do you know the way?'

'Oh-oh, yes.'

Melanie got to her feet, her mind buzzing. It could only

be Michael, but why was he ringing her? And most es­pecially tonight when she was so ill prepared to take it.

However, she walked more composedly than she felt out into the hall and entered the kiosk, picking up the receiver automatically and speaking her name.

'Melanie! Melanie, is that you?'

She hardly recognized Michael's voice. His usually modulated cultured tones were harsh and croaking, and at once her sympathies were aroused.

'Michael! Michael, whatever's the matter?'

Her fiance uttered a husky chuckle. 'Don't panic, Mel­anie, I'm not dying - at least not yet. I'm afraid I've got a particularly severe dose of 'flu, and I'm feeling pretty ghastly. I wondered if there was any chance of your get­ting back to town in the near future.'

'Oh, Michael!' Melanie pressed her lips together help­lessly. 'How on earth have you caught such a chill? Have you been working late, or just neglecting yourself?'

Michael coughed hoarsely. 'I guess I've been over­working,' he said. 'Old Madison has been off for the past three days with cold and rheumatism, and I've been trying to keep up to date, without much success I might add.'

'Oh, Michael!' Melanie said again, feeling a rising sense of responsibility. 'You know you have to be careful when the weather's damp. Why didn't you just do what you could and let the rest go?'

'Well, I shall have to now, shan't I? Mother's been a brick. She's come up to the flat and has been staying here since yesterday, but she can't leave my father indefinitely and she wondered whether you were coming back soon.'

'I see.' Melanie chewed at her lower lip.

'I think she thinks she would be leaving me in capable

hands if you were around to do the shopping and so on,' Michael added. 'Besides,' there was a questioning note in his voice now, 'I half expected you would have left for home already.'

Melanie sighed. 'Yes, well, it's not as simple as I thought/

'What do you mean?' Michael coughed again.

Melanie lifted her shoulders in an involuntary gesture. How could she explain the complexities of the situation over the phone? How could she expect Michael to under­stand when he was so obviously unwell? With a slightly reluctant honesty, she said: 'I haven't been able to do everything I wanted yet.' She paused. 'When does your mother want to go home?'

Michael sniffed a little resentfully. 'Tomorrow, I think. Melanie, if my being ill is going to upset your plans, forget it. I shall simply have to manage here alone as best I can.'

Melanie sounded exasperated. 'Oh, honestly, Michael, don't take what I say so literally! I - I haven't completed all the details, but that doesn't mean I shan't come home at once. If you need me—'

'Of course I need you.' He sounded plaintive now. But just because I do doesn't mean you have to come running back here. I shall manage somehow.'

'Oh, Michael, please!' Melanie clenched her fingers round the telephone receiver. 'I -1 shall come home tomorrow. At least, I can start for home tomorrow. It may be the day after before I get there.'

'Well, if it's no trouble—'

'Of course it's no trouble.' Melanie quelled the feeling of despair that suddenly overwhelmed her. 'In - in fact, I think I ought to leave what I have to do here until after Christmas.'

'I agree.' Michael cleared his throat. 'I've missed you desperately, Melanie.'

Melanie felt her own cheeks suffuse with colour at his words and was glad he could not see them. She felt a sense of disloyalty, of betrayal almost, and possibly Michael's sudden need of her was the best thing that could have happened in the circumstances. It would give her a reason for leaving Cairnside and escaping from the un­happy associations of this afternoon...

When she walked back into the dining-room, Ian Mac- Donald looked up at her expectantly. 'Not bad news, I hope,' he said.

Melanie smiled. 'Not exactly. But it does mean I shall have to leave after all. Immediately.'

There was a polite chorus of sympathizing voices and she was forced to go on and elaborate on her reasons for departing so abruptly. Then, dinner over, she left the dining-room and approached the reception desk. Sean Bothwell's sister Helen was seated there, studying some ledgers, and she looked up in surprise when Melanie said:

'I would like you to make up my bill, please.'

Helen hid admirably any feelings Melanie's words might have aroused in her, and instead said politely: 'You're leaving us, Miss Stewart?'

Melanie nodded. 'Yes. In the morning. I wondered whether you could arrange for one of the mechanics from the garage to come out first thing in the morning and check my car over before I leave. I realize this is short notice, but - something has come up.'

'I see.' Helen inclined her head. 'I think that could be arranged. Will you be leaving before lunch, Miss Stewart?'

'I hope so.'

'Very well. I'll attend to it and have the account ready for you at breakfast.'

'Thank you.'

Melanie managed a faint smile and turned away to the stairs as a gust of air ensued from the opening outer door and Jennifer Craig breezed into the hall.

'Melanie!' she exclaimed, seeing the other girl at once. "You're the very person I want to see.'

Melanie was forced to turn back. 'Hello, Jennie.'

Jennifer came across to her and took her arm. 'Come and have a drink with me in the bar lounge,' she sug­gested. 'I want to talk to you.'

Melanie hesitated. 'I was just thinking of going to bed,' she confessed.

Jennifer wrinkled her nose. 'What, at nine o'clock?' She frowned. 'Then it's just as well I arrived as I did. Come on!'

Without appearing churlish, Melanie could not refuse and she allowed Jennifer to draw her across the hall and into the lounge. As the night before, there were few people about, and Jeffrey was at his usual position behind the bar. Jennifer waved at him cheerfully, but she and Melanie seated themselves at a table near the roaring fire and Jennifer herself went to get their drinks.

When she came back, she had a gin and tonic and a pineapple juice. 'There you are,' she said, handing Mel­anie the gin and tonic. 'I don't drink, you see, at least - not alcohol.'

Melanie thanked her, her eyes darting uncomfortably towards the door. If Helen told her brother that Jennifer had arrived he would be bound to appear soon. It was terribly difficult to concentrate on what Jennifer was saying, when her nerves were stretched to screaming pitch.

'Now,' Jennifer said at last, sipping her pineapple juice, 'I wanted to apologize.'

Melanie dragged her thoughts back to the present. 'To apologize?' she echoed.

'Of course. For yesterday. I came yesterday evening, actually, but Helen said you had a migraine.'

'That's right, I had.' Melanie toyed with her drink. 'But there's no need to apologize.'

'I disagree. I was terribly sorry about Sean's attitude, and I felt to blame. After all, you weren't to know I had been ill, and that Sean has this terribly protective thing about me.'

Melanie controlled her features. 'That's all right, Jennie. I didn't blame you.'

'No, but you can understand how I felt, can't you? I mean - well, Sean can be pretty blistering at times, and if it hadn't been for me—'

'Think nothing of it,' said Melanie, rather tightly. Then a thought struck her. 'By the way, did - er — did Mr. Bothwell light the stove afterwards?'

Jennifer frowned. 'Light the stove? Oh, no, not so far as I know.'

Melanie hunched her shoulders. 'Someone did.'

'What?'

Melanie looked up. 'You may remember, you went to the village to get some wood for the fire?'

'Yes.'

'Did you get any?'

Jennifer frowned. 'Yes, I did. I thought Sean gave it to you.'

'No. No one gave any to me. Anyway, after you had gone I realized I needed some wood if I was going to get the heating going and I walked back down to the village. When I got back the fire was on.'

Jennifer frowned again. 'I see. Well, I'm sorry, I don't know anything about it.' There was a troubled look in her eyes. 'I must ask Sean—'

'Oh, don't bother.' Melanie was quick to deter her. 'It's not important.'

'What's not important?'

Jennifer looked up in surprise at the interruption, but Melanie did not need to raise her head to recognize Sean Bothwell's deep sardonic tones. Her pulses began to race and her heart began to pound and an awful sense of inad­equacy was assailing her. She lifted her glass and sipped the gin and tonic desperately, willing him to go away, but to her horror Jennifer patted the seat beside her and he sat down.

Although she did not look up, Melanie was conscious of him with every fibre of her being, her averted vision taking in only the muscled strength of his legs beneath the tight-fitting material of his cream trousers and the tanned length of the fingers of the hand that rested casu­ally on his knee.

'Oh, Sean,' Jennifer was saying now, 'Melanie was asking me whether you had lit the stove for her after we left yesterday.'

Melanie's fingers were clamped so tightly round her glass she thought the pressure might shatter its deli­cacy.

However, Scan seemed under no such strain, for he answered Jennifer with casual indolence. 'No, I didn't fight the stove,' he remarked. 'Jeff did!'

Now Melanie's eyes flickered upwards, meeting his controlled gaze with unconcealed bitterness. Why couldn't he have told her that when she asked him, in­stead of pretending there might be some supernatural ex­planation? He must have known that half her fear this afternoon stemmed from that fabrication he had con­cocted for her benefit.

'There you are, Melanie,' Jennifer said now. 'You should just have asked Sean. He would have told you.'

Melanie compressed her lips. She wanted to wipe that sardonic amusement from Sean's face once and for all, but she didn't know how. However, she would not allow him to get away with it completely.

'But I did ask Mr. Bothwell,' she remarked now, her eyes challenging. 'Didn't I, Mr. Bothwell?'

Jennifer frowned, looking from one to the other of them with puzzled speculation. 'You asked Scan? Then why—'

'Mr. Bothwell told me some weird story about Angus Cairney getting up from his grave to stoke his own fire-'

Jennifer was astonished, and Melanie had the satisfac­tion of feeling that at last she had disconcerted him.

'Is that true, Sean?' Jennifer turned to him.

'What? That I told Miss Stewart about the supposed smoke curling from the chimneys - yes.'

Melanie looked at him impatiently. 'You mean there is such a story?'

Jennifer sighed. 'Oh, yes, but when anybody dies in such isolated surroundings there are always stories. Sean!' She looked reproachfully at him. 'You shouldn't have al­lowed Melanie to suspect—'

Sean drew out his cigars and placed one between his teeth. 'Am I to be held responsible for what Miss Stewart suspects?'

Melanie bent her head again. She had not disconcerted him at all, merely aroused a scarcely suppressed am­usement in Jennifer's eyes and given them a useful an­ecdote to relate about her.

Finishing her drink, she rose abruptly to her feet. 'Excuse me. But I'm leaving in the morning, and I want to have an early night—'

'You're leaving in the morning?' Sean had risen also and was regarding her closely. 'I didn't know that.'

Melanie twisted her hands together behind her back. 'Didn't you? I thought your - er - sister would have told you.'

'Helen? No, I haven't seen her recently.' His eyes nar­rowed, and the dark lashes veiled their expression. 'I understood you were staying until Monkshood was made habitable.'

Jennifer rose too now and came to stand beside them. 'Will you be coming back, Melanie?' she asked, with obvious regret that the other girl was leaving.

Melanie sighed. 'Yes - yes, I expect so. But not for several weeks, I don't suppose. There's Christmas, you see, and all the usual festivities. It may be the spring ...'

Sean's eyes were hard now and he chewed at the end of his cigar. 'Am I to understand that you wish me to con­tinue looking after the property?'

Melanie gave an exclamation. 'Oh, of course. I had forgotten about that. Would you do that?'

He shrugged. 'If you want me to.'

Jennifer slid an arm through his confidingly. 'Perhaps you've frightened Melanie away with your tales of the supernatural,' she said.

Melanie managed a smile. It was expected of her. Jennifer was clearly aware of tension in the air, and was trying to lighten it. 'No,' Melanie answered now, 'no, Mr. Bothwell's fabrication did not frighten me.' She spoke deliberately, noting with some satis­faction that his eyes narrowed at her casual words, but that satisfaction was short-lived. Now that the moment was approaching for her to leave she no longer wanted to go, and it was a disturbing realization.

With determination, she said: 'My fiance has been taken ill. He wants me to go home.'

Jennifer was at once sympathetic, but Sean said nothing, and Melanie felt an inexplicable burning behind her eyes. She knew she had to get away before she was tempted to say or do something that she might regret, and wishing them both good night, she walked to the door.

'See you when you come back!' called Jennifer after her, and Melanie glanced back once to see Jennifer tuck her arm confidingly through Sean's and look up at him warmly.

London was the same as ever. Melanie arrived back there two days later in the height of the rush hour and it took her more than an hour to reach her flat in Bays- water. Even so, it was reassuring to know that she could walk down a street here without being recognized or speculated upon.

It was good to be home among familiar things, and she wandered round her apartment examining its contents with new appreciation. It wasn't a particularly large flat, possessing only a lounge and minute kitchen, a bedroom and a tiny bathroom, but it was home, and she poured herself a glass of sherry before sinking down lazily on to the couch and reaching for the cream telephone.

When she got through to Michael's apartment he was delighted to hear from her. 'I was just thinking about you,' he said, 'and wishing you were here. Get your coat on again and come straight round. I can ring Luigi's and ask him to send us dinner up.'

Melanie stretched her legs out in front of her. 'Darling, give me a moment to catch my breath,' she exclaimed. 'I just got in quarter of an hour ago, and I haven't had time to bathe or change or anything.'

Michael sounded impatient. 'Never mind that. I just want to see you. Do you realize it's over a week since you left London?'

Melanie stifled a yawn. 'All right,' she agreed. 'I'll just bathe and change and come round. I must freshen up. I'm absolutely exhausted.'

'All right.' Michael had to be content.

'How is your cold?'

He cleared his throat before replying. 'Better,' he said, noncommittally. 'Hurry, darling. I'm longing to see you.'

Melanie rang off and sat staring at the phone for sev­eral minutes. Michael had sounded much better and she hoped her return to London had not been something con­trived by him and his mother. She knew Mrs. Croxley was eager for them to get married soon, and she, like Michael, had not approved of Melanie's trip north, but even so ...

Leaving the problem unsolved, Melanie went to have a bath. Soaking in the scented depths she found it difficult not to speculate on the fact that at the hotel she would now have been sitting down for evening dinner. Since leaving Cairnside she had deliberately put all thoughts of Monkshood, and the Black Bull, and Jen­nifer, and most especially Sean Bothwell out of her mind, but now that the journey was over and she could relax again it was going to be infinitely more difficult to close her mind. Besides, perhaps that was the wrong thing to try and do. Situations tended to magnify out of all pro­portion if one refused to face them, and in any case what was there for her to face? What had happened had been the result of a set of circumstances that neither of them had been wholly responsible for, and she must forget the contempt Sean had shown for her and think only of the important aspects of her visit. After all, once Monkshood was habitable there would be no reason for her to involve him again. She would make arrangements with some in­dependent body to look after the house in her absence and pay them for their trouble. In fact the solicitors might be able to help her there.

The decision made, she rose out of the luxurious depths of the bath and reached for a fluffy yellow towel to dry herself.

She dressed with care that evening. She wanted Mich­ael to see her at her best and maybe too to restore a little of the confidence Sean Bothwell was so easily able to de­prive her of. In a blouse of white Venetian lace and a clinging ankle-length black skirt, a cloak of dark green woollen cloth edged with black fur about her shoulders, she looked quite beautiful, and the taxi driver who trans­ported her from her flat to Michael's in his cab com­plimented her with his obvious admiration.

Michael's apartment was in a tall skyscraper block near the Embankment, not too far from his offices in Lincoln's Inn. It was a luxurious place, much too big for one man, but Melanie was to move in with him once they were married. Until then, he managed alone with only a daily woman to do his housework. It was a service flat and he only used his own facilities early in the morning and late at night. Melanie thought it was a terrible waste of a beautiful kitchen and she intended to change all that.

A lift transported her to the seventh floor and she walked along the corridor to Michael's door. She rang the bell and there was a moment's pause before Michael him­self opened the door.

Michael Croxley was a tall thin young man in his early

thirties. His conventional good looks were enhanced by meticulous attention to detail in his style of dress and he had his suits made to measure and his shirts hand-sewn. He never adhered too closely to fashion, and yet he always managed to maintain a fashionable elegance, choosing only those accoutrements which were in keeping with the solemnity of his profession. Brown hair, streaked with grey in places, added distinction, and Melanie had always admired him tremendously. They had met through her publisher, Desmond Graham, and had been going about together now for three years, since Melanie was twenty-one, in fact. They had been officially engaged for only six months, although Melanie had known from the start that Michael was serious about her. He was rather a serious young man.

Now, as he opened the door to her his serious features lightened considerably, and he exclaimed: 'Melanie! Darling! Am I glad to see you!'

Melanie allowed him to draw her into the fiat and sur­veyed his appearance frowningly. Although his nose was a trifle red from frequent use of his handkerchief he by no means resembled the invalid she had expected to find, and a faint sense of annoyance rose inside her.

'How are you, Michael?' she asked, sliding off the cape with reluctance. 'You seem much better.'

Michael gave her a sheepish grin. 'I am. Much better!' he averred. 'Those antibiotics the doctor gave me must have worked miracles. You can't imagine what an un­comfortable few days I've had.' He bent and touched her lips with his own. 'But it's all been worth it if I've man­aged to get you back again.'

Melanie walked past him into his large comfortable living-room, controlling the urge she had to get angry with him. 'You surely don't mean all this was just an elaborate ruse to get me back to London?' she questioned, with assumed lightness.

Michael closed the living-room door behind them. He must have sensed the slight sarcasm in her voice, for he said: 'Of course not!' rather sharply. 'When I telephoned you I was genuinely feeling terrible and quite honestly I didn't know how I was going to manage after Mother left.'

Melanie sighed. It was no use feeling this sense of im­patience just because Michael had asked for her help in his hour of need. After all, her first allegiance should be to him, not to some derelict mansion in the Highlands of Scotland. She must stop placing so much importance on inanimate things!

Forcing a smile, she said now: 'Well, never mind, I'm here now. Aren't you going to offer me a drink? I could use one.'

Michael hesitated, looking searchingly at her, and then when Melanie was beginning to feel an unnecessary twinge of guilt he walked briskly across to the cocktail cabinet and began to mix their drinks. It was as though he was aware of a vague discontent in her attitude and Melanie wondered why his lean figure and handsome fea­tures suddenly seemed so alien to her.

With irritated determination she thrust such thoughts aside and sank down into one of the blue velvet up­holstered armchairs that made Michael's living-room look so elegant and attractive. She could not fault his taste in furnishings and did not expect to change much in that direction once they were married.

'Well?' Michael said, as he came to hand her a gin and tonic. 'How was it?'

Melanie sipped her drink before replying. 'You mean - Scotland?'

'What else?' Michael raised his glass to her and swal­lowed a mouthful of his drink. 'You were very incoherent in your explanations over the phone.'

Melanie compressed her lips. 'Well, it was difficult to talk about over the phone,' she said. 'Things were not as - well, straightforward as I had imagined.'

'What do you mean? Monkshood was there, wasn't it?' Michael's narrow eyebrows ascended.

'Oh, yes, of course it was there.' Melanie stroked the rim of her glass with a tentative finger. 'It was simply that someone else had expected to inherit the place.'

'Someone else?' Michael lounged into the opposite armchair draping a leg elegantly over one arm. 'I thought old Cairney was a solitary sort of chap.'

'Well, he was.' Melanie was finding it tremendously difficult to tell Michael about Sean Bothwell. Somehow she was loath to bring that relationship to the light of Michael's clinical gaze.

'Ob, come along,' Michael exclaimed now, impatience getting the better of him. 'What was it? Some old hanger- on?'

'No. No, nothing like that.' Melanie sipped her drink.

'Perhaps you ought to start at the beginning,' remarked Michael dryly, in his most officious manner. 'It seems to me that this whole business has had a rather disturbing effect on you. I sensed a certain - shall we say - reserve about you, the minute you came in.'

'Oh, Michael, stop treating me like a client!' Melanie bit her lip. 'I am trying to explain, really, it's just that - well, it's rather a private matter.'

'Private? To whom?'

'To Sean Bothwell!'

'Sean Bothwell!' Michael reached for his cigarettes,

'Who is Sean Bothwell?'

'The man who expected to inherit Monkshood.'

'I see. And he is - who?'

'He owns the Black Bull. The hotel where I stayed.'

'I see,' said Michael again, obviously trying to make sense out of her rather disjointed comments. 'And is he some relation to your late uncle, too?'

'Yes.' Melanie finished her drink. 'The closest relation possible. His son, in fact.'

'His son!' Michael swung his leg to the floor. 'Old Angus had a son!' He shook his head. 'The old devil! And he didn't tell anyone. So the house might not be yours after all, is that it? But why the disparity in the names?'

'Michael, please. You're going too quickly.' Melanie rose to her feet. 'I'm trying to explain. Monkshood is mine. Bothwell was not officially his offspring.'

'Good lord! Now I begin to see a glimmer of light.'

'He thought Angus had no relatives, and the old man had let him believe that the house would be his when he died. The will was never discussed.'

Michael's hands cupped his glass. 'What a situation! Poor old Bothwell! And what's he like? I gather you had discussions with him.'

'You might say that,' conceded Melanie dryly. She walked across to the drinks cabinet to pour herself a second drink so that Michael should not be able to ob­serve her expression so closely. 'He - he's quite young, really. Rather a - a - dominating personality!'

'Indeed?' Michael's tone was dry now. 'Is he mar­ried?'

'No! At least -1 don't think so.' She frowned, her hand slightly unsteady as she poured her drink. She couldn't in all honesty be certain of anything about Bothwell.

Realizing that Michael would be wondering why she

was spending so long at the cabinet, she turned and walked swiftly back to her seat. A sip of her drink suc­cessfully hid her expression until she had time to compose herself. Then Michael said:

'Does he want the house?'

Melanie looked up. 'Yes, he does.'

'I see.' Michael seemed slightly relieved and Melanie did not for the moment understand why until he went on: 'I'm glad. Quite honestly, I could see no future for us there. I mean, it's too far away for a week-end place, and our work is here - in London.'

Melanie's eyes widened now. 'You expect me to sell it, then?'

Michael frowned. 'Of course. Don't you?'

'Frankly, no!'

'But why?' Michael finished his drink. 'It's of no earthly use to you, and as this chap seems to have a kind of prior claim on it, it's the least you can do.'

'No, it's not!' Melanie straightened her back. 'Look, Michael, we haven't had time to talk about the house yet, or my plans for it. Let's wait until we've eaten, and then you can ask all the questions you like.' She smiled to soften his expression.

Michael frowned more deeply. 'Very well,' he agreed. 'I simply see no point in discussing it. I told you before you left that it was a fool's errand.'

'But it wasn't, Michael. It's a house with great pos­sibilities. I -1 could work there.'

Michael rose to his feet. 'But I could not,' he observed heavily. Then he shrugged. 'As you say, let's wait until we have eaten. I told Luigi I would ring when we were ready.'

The food was delicious. Melanie thought that that was one of the advantages of a service flat if you didn't feel like preparing a meal yourself you could always have one sent up. Several glasses of wine had relaxed her tension, and as they sat having liqueurs with their coffee she began to feel more at home. After all, this was where she belonged, here with Michael in this wonderfully warm and air-conditioned apartment, replete and lazy after a good meal. They were seated together on the comfortable couch, Michael with his arm about her shoulders, and Melanie thought contentedly that they resembled one of those adverts for luxurious modern living. A vastly different proposition from an isolated house in the High­lands where the heating was inclined to be erratic, and where air-conditioning had never even been heard of.

So it was that when Michael again brought up the question of Monkshood, Melanie began to wonder why she was being so adamant about keeping the place. After all, how often would it be used? Would she really be able to leave Michael once they were married and work in Scotland? Somehow it seemed doubtful. Apart from any­thing else, Michael demanded his comforts, and once he was used to having her around he would not relinquish her presence easily. She knew already that her work would always come second to his and she told herself that that was how it should be. She had never felt any desire to escape from his protection before, so there was no earthly reason to feel that way now.

'If you sold the house,' Michael was saying gently and persuasively, 'you could use the money in whatever way you chose. You could even buy us a country cottage if you felt so inclined. Somewhere in Kent or Sussex perhaps, somewhere where we could go to be completely alone.'

Melanie tipped her head on one side to look at him. He really was the most inordinately handsome man, she thought with some satisfaction. The slight wave in his hair fell across his forehead, and his blue eyes were wide and boy like in their ardour. And yet.. .

She flicked her gaze back to the pseudo-effect of the electric fire. 'In eleven weeks we'll be married,' she mur­mured, half to herself, but Michael took her up on it at once.

'Exactly,' he said. 'Eleven weeks. And Christmas and New Year festivities in less than a fortnight. We don't have a lot of time really to spend looking at derelict country houses.'

Melanie squashed any faint doubts that still persisted. \*No,' she said slowly. 'You're right, I suppose. I guess the idea of owning a house went to my head, and knowing that the owner had been a distant relative ... Well, Michael, it is some time since I had any relative at all.'

Michael pressed his lips to her forehead. 'Soon we'll change all that,' he murmured huskily. 'You'll have a hus­band, and a mother- and father-in-law.'

'And children,' continued Melanie contentedly.

'Eventually,' said Michael complacently. 'We don't want the patter of tiny feet quite at once, do we, dar­ling?'

Melanie shrugged. 'You can't always choose, Michael.'

Michael flicked his fingers in a fastidious way. 'I'm sure something can be arranged, darling,' he replied, reaching for his cigarettes so that Melanie moved out of the circle of his arm. And as she did so, a little of her new-found contentment vanished and again doubts assailed her.

Was she allowing Michael the upper hand all the way along the line? The right to direct her life without any obvious participation on her behalf? Why did she con­tinually get this feeling that she was being programmed on a course of self-destruction?

She bent and lifted the glass of cognac Michael had poured for her and sipped it rather desperately, seeking the bland acceptance of fate she had experienced a little while ago. She must stop all this soul-searching. Michael had been wonderful to her. He was a man many women admired, not only for his looks and money, but also for the position he held in society. She was ungrateful to imagine he was moulding her as he wanted her to be .simply because he made all the decisions. Did she want a man who meekly accepted her adjurations, or Michael w ho only did what he thought best for her? After all, his work was the important thing, not hers, and she must seek fulfilment in other spheres than artistic ones. As Michael's wife she would be expected to entertain and be enter­tained, and all imagined plans of converting Monks­hood into a comfortable home would be forgotten ...

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was amazing how quickly Melanie settled down to life in London again. She had plenty to occupy her mind with the usual seasonal celebrations in full swing and her pub­lisher had a whole new series of illustrations lined up for her. He was pleased with the work she had done and showed more interest in Monkshood than Michael had done. Maybe his business mind saw possibilities there for Melanie; in any event when he discussed it with her he was not so adamant that she would be a fool not to sell it.

'Let it ride,' he advised her kindly. 'After all, the house is yours, and so long as you keep up to date with the rates and so on, there's absolutely no reason why you should be forced to sell until you've explored every possibility.'

Melanie listened to him carefully. Desmond Graham was not the sort of man to give advice lightly and she was inclined to agree with him when he said that there was no particular hurry to do anything.

So she put all thoughts of disposing of Monkshood out of her mind and concentrated instead on the immediate future. If Michael wondered whether she had contacted the Scottish solicitors he made no mention of it, and as he had returned to work too, to an apparent deluge of a backlog, he had little time to worry about her affairs.

Melanie joined Michael and his parents for Christmas. As well as the four of them there were also Michael's elder sister Lucy and her husband and three children, and consequently it was quite a family party. Melanie enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere and as she had only known the pleasure such family groups can bring since she became Michael's girl-friend, she felt gratitude towards him for making her a part of his life.

It snowed on Boxing Day and in the afternoon the young people joined the children in the garden for a snowball fight. It was quite a boisterous affair, but Mel­anie noticed that Michael found it rather difficult to shed his air of dignity. However, he seemed to enjoy himself and afterwards they all sat round the fire drinking mulled wine and eating mince pies. Altogether it was a delightful few days and Melanie was sorry when it was over and they had to return to town.

London, after snow, was cold and slushy underfoot. Melanie wore her knee-length boots continually, com­bining them with a slim-fitting emerald green coat edged with dark fur which just brushed the tops of her boots. Going to and from the office she thought of the difference between this urban environment and the pure un­blemished wastes of snow around Cairnside, and felt again the. longing to try and persuade Michael that they might conceivably make something of Monkshood. After all, surely once Michael had been there and experienced that sense of unconfinement which can only be experi­enced away from the city, he would understand a little of her reluctance to sell the place.

But in spite of her vague hopes, she did not mention the matter to Michael. Somehow she realized that it would be more tactful to wait until the weather improved before suggesting a visit there, and as there were no immediate problems, the matter was allowed to rest. Instead, she involved herself in her work to the exclusion of every­thing else, and as Michael had the usual spate of after- holiday convictions to attend to they had little time for conversations of that sort.

One evening, towards the end of January, Melanie ar­rived back at her apartment rather later than usual. There had been an unexpected business meeting at the office which had delayed her until after seven, but as she had no particular plans for the evening she had not minded.

But by the time she arrived back at the apartment she was beginning to feel distinctly empty inside and she was mentally speculating upon the contents of the re­frigerator when she noticed a man at the top of her flight of stairs, apparently waiting for her, as there were no flats above her floor.

At once, she was reminded of that other occasion when she had seen a dark figure at the head of a flight of stairs and she hesitated a moment before continuing on her way. However, as she began to mount the stairs, the man stepped forward and said: 'Good evening, Miss Stewart. I was beginning to wonder whether indeed you slept here after all!'

Melanie halted uncertainly, staring up into the shad­owy planes of Sean Bothwell's lean face. For a moment, she half-believed her hunger was giving her halluci­nations, but the width of his shoulders seemed real enough, and the sardonic expression he wore was wholly memorable.

She reached the top of the stairs and hiding her shocked feelings, she said, quite calmly: 'Good evening, Mr. Bothwell. This is an unexpected - surprise.'

'Is it?' Bothwell stood back to allow her to place her key in her lock. 'I don't see why. I prefer to do business myself, not allow a lot of ham-fisted lawyers to do it for me.'

Melanie stared at him doubtfully and then shook her head. Was she particularly dense, or did what he was saying not make sense? Either way, they could not stand on her landing indefinitely, inviting the comment of her neighbours.

Turning her key, she pushed open her door. 'Won't you come in?' she invited, somewhat reluctantly.

Bothwell looked at her for a long moment in the glow from the lamps she had switched on as she entered the room, and then shrugged. 'If you wish,' he said indifferently, and she stood back to allow him to pass her before closing the door and leaning back against it rather nervously. Here, in the intimacy of her apartment, Both- well seemed overpoweringly dominant, and although she did not yet know the reason for this visit she knew that after he had gone something of his personality would be left behind here. It was a disturbing thought and one which she did not choose to dwell upon.

Bothwell walked to the centre of the room and looked about him with apparent interest. In a dark overcoat, which he had loosened to reveal a cream fur lining inside, and a dark suit he looked big and powerful, dwarfing the generous proportions of the living-room. His hair was slightly longer than Michael's and brushed the collar of his coat, while the sideburns down his cheeks gave him a slightly alien air. Melanie wondered why this man with his harshly carved features and ruthless manner should command such arrogant masculinity, while Michael, who was infinitely more handsome and certainly more soph­isticated, should seem less effectual somehow. Or maybe it was simply a case of environmental influences creating the framework within which one's progress was con­trolled.

Melanie shrugged her speculations aside, and un­buttoned her coat. Now that Bothwell was here, in her living-room, she half wished she had insisted on speaking with him in the corridor outside and risked the comments of the other tenants. Somehow in her apartment it was too personal and in any case she could not think of any reason why he should want to speak to her personally. His talk of lawyers and business representation had gone over her head.

Draping her coat over a chair, she said now: 'Can I offer you a drink?' in an effort to break the heavy silence which had fallen.

Bothwell turned his attention from some prints she had on her walls and said: 'Thank you. I'll have Scotch, if I may.'

'Of course.'

Melanie smoothed her short skirt over her hips and walked across to the cupboard where she kept her small store of alcohol. Pouring a generous measure of whisky into a glass, she handed it to him, turning back to help herself to some sherry. It was all she dared to drink on an empty and rather nauseated stomach.

He seemed indifferent to her indications that he should be seated, but she perched awkwardly on the arm of a chair to support herself. Then she said: 'I didn't know you were a frequent visitor to London, Mr. Bothwell.'

'I'm not.' Bothwell swallowed most of his whisky in one gulp and toyed with his glass absently. 'However, in this instance, I felt the least I could do was put in a personal appearance, as it were.'

Wetting her dry lips, Melanie made a tentative gesture. 'Exactly what brings you to London, Mr. Bothwell?' she asked.

He frowned now, and she thought she had annoyed him, although she could not imagine why. 'Don't play cat and mouse with me, Miss Stewart,' he retorted curtly, reminding her vividly that he was not as predictable as most of the men she knew when it came to controlling his temper. 'You know perfectly well why I'm here, and I can see no point in pretending otherwise.'

Melanie was taken aback. 'I do not know why you're here, Mr. Bothwell,' she asserted sharply, 'and what's more, I find your manner offensive. You may have held the upper hand while I was obliged to stay in your hotel, but here you are on my ground, and I—'

Bothwell uttered an expletive and turned away, walk­ing across to her uncurtained windows and looking out on the Bayswater square below. In the lights from the street lamps, it looked cold and desolate, even the steady stream of traffic on the main road at the end of the narrow entry providing little colour or appeal.

'Miss Stewart,' he said heavily, obviously controlling himself with difficulty, 'are you now prepared to deny that you wrote to me offering me the opportunity to buy Monkshood at a considerably inflated price?'

Melanie gasped, and the shocked sound that escaped her caused him to turn rather sharply to face her. His eyes regarded her intently, and then he began to walk slowly back to her, finishing his drink as he did so. He halted a couple of feet from her, his light eyes brooding, and Mel­anie gulped her sherry shakily.

'So,' he said at last. 'Do I take it you deny it?'

Melanie found her voice. 'Of course I deny it. I haven't written to anyone. Not even the solicitors.'

'Then who do you suppose did write to me?' His tone was harsh and impatient.

'I - I can't imagine.' Melanie put a hand to her cheek. Then she looked up. 'You must believe me. I don't know anything about such a letter. Was - was it from me?'

'No, it was from McDougall and Price. The solicitors in Fort William.'

Melanie shook her head helplessly. 'But who would do such a thing without my permission ...?' And then her voice trailed away as a thought struck her. There only was one person who could have done it - Michael! He was the only one who had had any discussion with her about selling the house and obviously he had taken her acquiescence to his suggestions as proof of her agreement. And while she had been imagining the problem forgotten and shelved he had been dealing with it for her.

A sense of outrage rose inside her that he should have taken so much upon himself, only to be followed by the realization that he had thought he was doing what she wanted. And yet he had never mentioned a word about it to her, and had acted entirely upon his own authority. And now Bothwell was here, demanding to see her, pre­pared to pay whatever she asked for the house. What was she to do, what could she do?

Bothwell was watching the play of emotions across her expressive face and when she looked up at him again, he said: 'I gather you have some idea now who put the prop­osition forward?'

'Yes. At least -1 think it was Michael.'

'Michael?'

'My fiance.'

'I see. I presume he wants to sell the house, after all. Obviously he does not share your sentimental aspirations for the place.'

Melanie coloured. 'No, he doesn't. But he hasn't seen it yet.'

Bothwell's expression darkened. 'What do you mean - yet?'

'Exactly what I say. I planned to bring him up when the weather improves.'

'My God!' Bothwell pressed his palms against his hips, sliding his hands down his coat to fall almost menacingly by his sides. 'You mean you still intend to follow that crazy idea?'

'Of - of course.'

Melanie slid off the arm of the chair and walked ner­vously about the room. 'I'm sorry if you've had a wasted journey, but in all honesty, you can't blame me. I didn't write any letters. I can't be held responsible for the actions of my fiance.'

'Your fiance is your solicitor, too, I gather.'

'That's right.'

'I see.'

Bothwell chewed his lower lip. Then he drew out a case of cheroots and placed one between his teeth. "When it was lit he threw the match he had used into her fireplace, disregarding the fact that Melanie's fire was an electric one. Then he seemed to force himself to relax, and in a much less taut tone, he said: 'And your fiance did not take you into his confidence. I wonder why? Did he suspect you might change your mind?'

'I did not make up my mind,' replied Melanie, sighing. 'In actual fact, I thought the whole problem had been shelved. As I said before, I'm sorry.'

'So am I!' Bothwell flicked ash carelessly into the hearth. Then, with assumed nonchalance, he turned and flung himself into one of her comfortable armchairs. 'I must have a few words with that young - man!'

Melanie pressed her lips together. 'I -1 shan't be seeing him this evening.'

'No?' Bothwell raised his dark eyebrows.

'No.' Melanie sighed and moved her hands helplessly. 'I -1 - is there anything else?'

Bothwell shrugged his broad shoulders. He was no longer frowning broodingly at her, but still he did not smile, nor was there any sign of good humour in his face. In fact, Melanie distrusted the somewhat calculating ex­pression she saw in his eyes, and she wondered what he intended to do now.

'You look rather pale, Miss Stewart,' he remarked pointedly. 'Have you eaten this evening?'

Melanie lifted her shoulders. 'Not yet—'

'Then put your coat on again, and I'll take you out for a meal.'

'Oh, but really -1-1 couldn't.' Melanie sought desper­ately for an excuse.

'Why not?' He shrugged. 'I haven't eaten either. Surely you're not going to allow what happened at Monkshood to influence your decision. After all, I've travelled all this way to see you and the least you can do is agree to enter­tain me for the evening.' His eyes narrowed. 'You need not concern yourself. I don't intend repeating that inci­dent at Monkshood. Your kind of woman does not interest me, and I do not believe in bearing grudges.'

Melanie was affronted by his bitterness and by the cold unfeeling glint in his eyes. And yet, deep inside her, a wayward streak of perversity badly wanted to prove to him that she was not the kind of creature he imagined her to be. He had nothing with which to reinforce his own opinions, but that disastrous few moments in the kitchen at Monkshood, and as he said, that would never be re­peated. Even so, she was amazed that he dared to couch his proposal that they should spend the evening together in such a morass of insolence. She should refuse and eject him from her apartment forthwith, or was that really what he expected her to do? She could never be sure with him.

There was another reason why his suggestion appealed to her, too. It would give her the greatest pleasure to tell

Michael that she had spent the evening with Sean Both- well, and would in some way recompense her for her resentment at this further example of the high-handed way he attempted to handle her affairs.

Taking her courage into her hands, she said: 'All right, I will have dinner with you. Will you wait a moment while I change?'

If Bothwell was surprised that she should accept his invitation, he hid his feelings admirably, and the mean­ingful lift of an eyebrow was all the reaction she achieved.

While she changed, however, Melanie found herself wondering exactly why he had invited her to have dinner with him. After all, he was not the kind of man to find female companionship hard to come by. She felt con­vinced that in ordinary circumstances women would find his harsh features and slightly wolfish air very appealing, so it could not be that he was lonely. And then there was Jennifer to consider. Where did she belong in his life? Did he intend to marry her? And if he did would she be able to satisfy him?

Melanie bit her lip and applied herself to stroking mas­cara on her already dark lashes. These were problems that were no concern of hers, so why was she troubling herself with them? Why did she persist in probing her relationship with this man to the nth degree? Why did his very presence inspire the most disturbing emotions inside her so that awareness of him was almost a tangible thing? She had thought when she returned from Scotland and had taken up her relationship with Michael again that all thoughts of Sean Bothwell would fade in her mind, but now that he was here she knew they were as rampant as ever.

She chose a dress of purple wool, short and swinging,

and very becoming. And to go with it she wore her long ankle-length coat of black velvet edged with fur. When she emerged from her bedroom and sought his gaze, she could not tell whether he found her appearance ap­pealing or not. He rose to his feet politely, but there was a certain enigmatic hauteur about him which defied analysis, and Melanie could only accept that the evening ahead excited her as it should not have done in the cir­cumstances.

He buttoned his coat and with casual ease crossed the room to open the outer door for her. They descended the two flights of stairs to the street in silence and emerged into the chill evening air. Melanie had put on black suede boots, and she lifted the skirt of her coat as they crossed the square to the main road to summon a taxi. She won­dered where the Range-Rover might be and then decided he had probably travelled down by train.

As they climbed into the cab Bothwell spoke to the driver and when he lowered his bulk beside her on the wide bench seat he said: 'I've asked him to take us to Roscani's.'

Melanie looked at him in some surprise. Roscani's was a comparatively new restaurant which had opened in a narrow thoroughfare off Piccadilly and she would not have thought he would know of it. However, as though sensing her perplexity, he went on:

'I do visit London from time to time, Miss Stewart. Cairnside is not exactly the back of beyond.'

Melanie shrugged her slim shoulders. 'I shouldn't have thought you would find much to appreciate in this en­vironment,' she remarked. 'City-dwellers do not rate highly in your estimation.'

'Did I say that?'

Melanie sighed. 'You know you implied it.'

'Did I? How impolite of me!' A faint glimmer of humour penetrated his otherwise cool tones and Melanie glanced quickly at him hoping to find its counterpart in his expression, but he had turned his head away to look out of the window of the cab and she could not see what was in his face.

She wondered why he had invited her out this evening. Certainly it could not be because he enjoyed her company, and yet why else should he insist that she dined with him? Did he hope perhaps to get her to talk about Monkshood and maybe convince her that she was wast­ing her time and his by delaying the inevitable?

She couldn't be sure what his motives might be, and in all certainty she should not have accepted this invitation feeling as she did, and yet . .. She had not wanted to refuse!

He did not make small talk with her in the cab, and when the taxi driver brought his vehicle to a halt in Rossiter Place he helped her to climb out in silence. After he had paid the driver, he turned and cupping her elbow with one hand lie led her across the pavement to the shal­low steps that led up to the entrance of the restaurant.

They entered on to a fitted red carpet which filled a small entrance lobby from which two glass doors opened; one led into a small bar lounge, and the one opposite led into the restaurant. A solicitous attendant took their coats and then Bothwell indicated that they might go into the lounge first for a drink.

It was rather an attractive bar at which they seated themselves and as the room was only comfortably filled there was no difficulty about getting their drinks. Melanie chose another sherry, deciding not to risk anything stronger, while Bothwell had his usual whisky.

All around them people were laughing and talking and enjoying themselves while Melanie felt taut and strung up and unable to relax. She half wished she had refused his invitation, after all. However, it was too late now and she would simply have to make the best of it and hope that no one she knew saw them. Then she squashed this thought. Bothwell would be bound to see Michael anyway to demand an explanation, and her fiance was bound to find out that they had spent this evening together. She wished she had not allowed a fit of pique to create a situation acceptable to none of them.

Bothwell lit a cheroot and glanced along at her, resting his arms on the bar. 'You're very quiet,' he observed. 'Is this your usual demeanour, or has my presence robbed you of your tongue?'

Melanie tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. 'I was just waiting for you to speak,' she replied. !I was be­ginning to wonder whether you had regretted your de­cision to dine with me.'

'Why should you think that?'

Melanie frowned. This close she was disturbingly aware of him, and a ripple of apprehension slid along her spine. She could study every tiny facet of his features, the long lashes, the sensual lower lip, the vital springiness of his hair. He had a magnetism that appealed to her basest instincts, she decided desperately, as a desire to touch him assailed her. She was experiencing again the passionate demand of his mouth upon hers and the urgent strength of his body and the lean hardness of his hands against her flesh. She looked away, trying to still her racing senses, to calm the pounding of her heart that thundered in her cars. It was only the vicarious awakening of the senses that could be gained from anticipating the unknown and in some cases the unattainable, she told herself furiously. He deliberately seemed to sense this awareness in her and used it to his own advantage, and she was a fool for responding to it. She must stop these emotions before they destroyed her.

'Stop trying to analyse me, Miss Stewart,' he said now, insinuatively in her ear. 'Accept the evening for what it is. Surely your inestimable fiance will not object.'

'Why should he?' Melanie's tone was unnecessarily sharp, conscious as she was of the tension enveloping her.

'Exactly. So let us relax and attempt to enjoy ourselves. We're merely a man and a woman breaking bread together. Surely there are plenty of topics we can discuss without tearing out each other's throats.'

'I suppose so.' Melanie was doubtful.

'Good.' He inclined his head. 'Now tell me about your work. I'm interested, even though my knowledge of the subject is limited.'

Surprisingly Melanie began to relax. Talking about her work always roused her enthusiasm, and that enthusiasm displaced other emotions temporarily. She found him sur­prisingly easy to discuss her work with, and he made cer­tain remarks of his own which revealed he was not entirely without artistic appreciation. Indeed, after a while Melanie forgot to whom she was speaking and they progressed into the field of music and literature. He had read a lot and they could discuss authors whom they both enjoyed. In music their tastes differed, but not greatly, and Melanie could quite see him appreciating her kind of modern music if he listened to it. They both agreed on the merits of classical music.

The meal Bothwell ordered was delicious. He had obvi­ously eaten there before and knew the speciality of the house, but Melanie had never tasted lobster cooked in wine before. They had liqueurs with their coffee and

Melanie lay back in her chair replete.

'I really will have to start watching my weight,' she remarked laughingly. 'After the cooking at the hotel and now this ...' She sighed.

Sean Bothwell half smiled. He had not smiled a great deal in the course of the evening, but when he did Mel­anie was amazed at the difference in his appearance.

'I don't think you have to bother so urgently,' he re­plied, with narrowed eyes. 'I don't care for a woman to be only skin and bone!'

'Jennifer is very thin,' said Melanie carelessly, and then flushed at the look on his face.

'Jennifer has been very ill,' he retorted harshly, his good humour evaporating as swiftly as it had come. 'She was not always so thin.'

Melanie bit her lip. 'I know. I'm sorry, I didn't mean that to sound as it did. It was simply a thought that came into my head and I spoke it aloud. I didn't mean to sound offensive.'

He stubbed out the cheroot he had been smoking. 'That's all right, Miss Stewart. I'm not offended. Jenni­fer's qualities are not superficial ones. They are innate in her as a person - something you perhaps might not ap­preciate.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing, absolutely nothing.'

He rose to his feet and Melanie realized that so far as he was concerned the evening was over. Sighing she rose too, lifting her evening bag from its resting place on the table. It was depressing to feel suddenly so deflated, as though she had reached an anti-climax and she asked herself impatiently what she had expected. After all, she had been merely someone with whom he could fill a couple of hours of his tune, someone she felt sure whom lie regarded with a certain amount of tolerance and a vast amount of impatience.

They left the restaurant and he summoned another taxi to take them back to Melanie's flat. She had half wondered whether he might not simply put her into the cab and make his own way to the hotel where he was staying, but obviously that was not in his mind, for he climbed into the cab with her.

It only took a few minutes to reach the square and again he dismissed the cab and accompanied her across to the entrance to her apartment.

Melanie turned at the entrance to the building and with what she hoped was a bright smile, said: 'Thank you for dinner. It was delightful and most unexpected, and I can only say again how sorry I am that you've had a wasted journey—'

'Are you not going to invite me up to your apartment for some coffee?' he queried, his eyes enigmatic.

Melanie was taken aback. 'We — we've just had coffee.'

'That was almost three-quarters of an hour ago. I could drink some more, couldn't you?'

'It's rather late—'

'It's half past ten. I understood London girls stayed up half the night!'

Melanie flushed. 'Not when they have jobs of work to go to.'

He shrugged. 'I see.'

With a helpless gesture she turned away, unable en­tirely to understand her reluctance to invite him into her flat again, but he caught her wrist in a powerful grasp.

'Are you afraid of me, Miss Stewart? Is that what it is?'

Melanie took a deep breath. 'Of course not.'

'Perhaps you should be at that,' he observed dryly.

'Why?' Melanie's tension erupted into anger. 'Because you once kissed me? Let me tell you, Mr. Bothwell, we city girls have more to contend with than a furtive em­brace in a deserted house!'

'Why, you—'

He broke off as she wrenched herself away from his grasp and ran into the apartment building. She hastened up the stairs to her flat, expecting any moment to hear him behind her, fumbling in her bag for her key. But her coat was long and cumbersome, and she couldn't manage to hold it up and search her bag and in consequence she stumbled and fell.

It was an ignominious fall, causing as it did the con­tents of her handbag to spill all over the stairway, and jarring the tender joint at the end of her spine. It could have been much worse; she could have hit her head or broken an arm or leg, but to Melanie it was the last straw and she wanted to cry with rage and frustration when Bothwell came to stand over her, looking down at her with humiliating appraisal.

'Are you hurt?' he demanded, going down on his haunches beside her and beginning to gather her belong­ings together and thrust them back into her evening bag.

Melanie shook her head. 'No, I don't think so,' she re­plied, getting unsteadily to her feet.

Bothwell finished collecting her things and rose too, regarding her intently. 'That was a crazy thing to do,' he muttered. 'You could have killed yourself!'

'I know.'

Melanie took her bag from his unresisting fingers and turned to climb the last few stairs. Her spine jarred pain­fully as she lifted her foot on to the next tread, but she hid the wince of pain that darkened her expression. However, Bothwell was beside her and when they reached the apartment and she began to search her bag for her key he dangled it in front of her eyes.

'I kept it,' he said, and without another word opened her door.

Melanie was too shaken to argue and when he ac­companied her inside she made no demur. Indeed, it seemed inevitable, somehow, and she slid her coat from her shoulders wearily.

Bothwell removed his overcoat as well and then said: 'Go and sit down. I'll make you some coffee.'

'No - I - that is, you don't know where everything is.'

'I can find out. Relax!'

Melanie sank down on to the couch. She couldn't hope to win an argument with him feeling as unsteady as she did and when he returned some ten minutes later with a tray of percolated coffee, she was half asleep from exhaustion. It had been a very tiring day at work, and this evening's events had been rather enervating, too. In consequence the warmth of the apartment combined with the effects of the wine she had drunk during the course of the evening had made her pleasantly drowsy.

Bothwell put down the tray on a low table nearby and then came to stand looking down at her. 'Well?' he said. 'How do you feel now?'

'Much, much better,' murmured Melanie, smoothing down her skirt which was riding up her legs. 'Did you find everything all right?'

'Fine,' he nodded, continuing to regard her intently. 'Why did you do such a crazy thing? Were you really afraid of me?'

Melanie coloured, and propped herself up on one

elbow. 'You said perhaps I should be,' she murmured huskily.

'Did I?'

'Yes.' Melanie felt suddenly breathless. Awareness of him filled her being with a longing so strong that she could not prevent herself from reaching out a hand and touching one of his.

His fingers slid between hers, and she looked up at him half apprehensively. 'Sean,' she murmured questioningly, unconsciously inviting much more than a mere touch of hands.

'Do you want me to make love to you?' he asked, in a curiously strangled tone.

Melanie swallowed hard. Put like that it seemed so sordid somehow. 'Sean,'she protested softly, 'don't talk...'

His expression darkened. 'Why?' he demanded harshly. 'Does it destroy the romantic illusion?'

Melanie tried to pull her fingers away at the unconcealed scorn in his voice, but he refused to release her. 'I am right, aren't I ?' he asked scathingly. 'That is what all this charade is about, isn't it? You wanted an affair in Scotland! That incident which you attempt to dismiss so disparagingly was no furtive embrace to you. It was a minor victory; it gave you a feeling of power because you knew I touched you against my will. And now you want to arouse that desire again, don't you? You may find this fiance of yours satisfactory when it comes to wealth and a position in society, but he doesn't satisfy those physical needs inside you that are eating you up—'

'Be quiet! How dare you speak to me like that!'

Melanie almost shouted the words as she swung her legs to the floor and got to her feet, staring at him furiously.

'The truth hurts, doesn't it?' His gaze flickered over her insolently.

'It's not the truth, and please let go of me!'

'With pleasure, Miss Stewart!'

He bowed his head grimly and without another word he crossed the room, lifted his coat to swing it over his shoulder, and walked out of the flat, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Melanie slept badly. She tossed and turned until the early hours and in consequence felt terrible when she got up. When she got to the office, Desmond Graham com­mented upon the black rings under her eyes.

'Late nights!' he remarked, gently chiding. 'They're not agreeing with you, my pet.'

'Actually I went to bed quite early,' snapped Melanie shortly, taking some sketches out of her briefcase. 'What do you think of these?'

Desmond raised his grey eyebrows. 'We're touchy this morning, aren't we? I was only joking!'

Melanie flushed. 'I'm sorry. I'm a bit edgy, that's all.'

'Why? Had a row with Michael?'

'No.' Melanie was emphatic.

'Then what is it? You're not worried about anything else, are you? Your work is excellent, and you've certainly nothing to worry about there. These sketches are damn good, as I'm sure you know.'

'I'm not worried about anything, Desmond. Stop making such an issue out of it. Does there have to be a reason for everything?'

'Well, I don't know,' Desmond shrugged. 'It's not like you to be edgy, that's all. You're usually such a calm, uncomplicated individual.'

'How do you know what I'm like?' Melanie took up his point argumentatively, knowing as she did so that she was using Desmond as a whipping boy for her frustration. But she couldn't help it somehow.

Desmond lit a cigarette, and refusing to take her ill- humour seriously he held up his hand in mock appeal. 'Okay, okay, I'm sorry I spoke! Forget what I've said. And if I've trodden on anyone's toes then I apologize!' He inhaled deeply. 'Now about these sketches for Agnes Bowman's story. Do you need the script, or will the cap­tions Vincent has written be enough?'

Melanie forced her mind into impersonal channels with difficulty, but as she looked at Desmond she felt a sense of remorse. After all, it was not his fault that she had spent such a terrible night, it was her own. Her own, for allowing Sean Bothwell to see that his disturbing per­sonality aroused a purely physical attraction inside her. She would make sure that never happened again.

'Desmond, I'm sorry,' she said quickly. 'I - well, some­thing's come up that I didn't expect, that's all.'

Desmond smiled. He had a nice smile. He was a nice man, thought Melanie warmly. Married, with two small daughters and a wife whom most people were immedi­ately attracted to, he still found time to share the prob­lems of his employees and was, because of this, well liked throughout the firm.

'Think nothing of it, honey,' he said now. You were right to complain. It's no business of mine.'

Melanie compressed her lips. 'Michael's been trying to sell Monkshood without my knowledge,' she said slowly.

'What?' Now Desmond looked surprised. 'How could he do that? I understand you'd shelved the whole tiling.'

'I had. He hadn't.'

'Didn't he discuss it with you?'

'Only in the beginning, and then I suppose I was pretty undecided about what to do. I can't remember saying definitely that I would sell, but alternatively I can't re­ member definitely saying I would not. In any case, Mich­ael wants me to use the money to buy a house nearer London instead.'

'Well, that's not such a bad idea,' remarked Desmond reflectively. 'After all, you'll have to consider him once you're married. Just because you can work anywhere ...'

'I know.' Melanie flicked impatiently through the sketches on her board. 'It shouldn't matter, should it? I mean - I shouldn't mind where I live so long as it's with Michael.'

'That's the idea!' Desmond grinned. 'Love is a great leveller of circumstances. You'll probably realize after you've been married a couple of months that you don't give a damn for Monkshood or anywhere else so long as you're together.'

Melanie bent her head. 'Yes,' she murmured doubt­fully. And then: 'To get back to these sketches ...'

Work absorbed her morning and not even the flying flakes of snow passing her windows could attract more than a fleeting reflection. But towards lunchtime, she had a telephone call, from Michael.

Deciding not to mention Monkshood over the phone, she said: 'Hello, Michael. Are you about to ask me out to lunch, because I'm free?'

Michael chuckled, rather forcedly, Melanie thought uneasily. 'Yes, that idea is in my mind. How about one o'clock in the grillroom of the Embassy?'

'All right.' Melanie was agreeable. The Embassy was quite a new hotel, its tables screened by partitions of trel­lises overhung with climbing plants; the ideal place for a private conversation.

'Good.' Michael sounded pleased, and Melanie paused to wonder whether his reasons for contacting her today had anything to do with Sean Bothwell's arrival. She was curious to know, but she did not want to bring that up over the phone. So she said:

'Did you get the tickets for the Dorlini concert?'

Michael was enthusiastic. 'Yes, I did. For Thursday evening. Is that all right with you?'

Melanie frowned. 'Thursday? Yes, I think so. When are we dining with the Allisons?'

'Friday.'

'That's okay, then. I must go, darling. I'm right in the middle of something.'

'Okay. See you at one!'

'Yes. 'Bye!'

Melanie rang off and then sat staring at the telephone for several concentrated minutes before Desmond's voice distracted her. Even then, she found her thoughts wan­dering for the rest of the morning and she was relieved when lunchtime came around. She was occupied with the problem of how she would confront Michael with his dealings behind her back. After all, she had always been told that the best method of defence was attack, and she intended to have her say before he began bringing up the fact of her evening dinner with Sean Bothwell.

She entered the Embassy a few minutes after one and a white-coated attendant escorted her to Michael's table. Owing to the partitions she could not see whether he had already arrived until they were almost there and then she caught her breath in a choking gulp. Michael was already there, but seated with him was Sean Bothwell!

Michael rose eagerly at her arrival, dismissing the waiter casually and urging Melanie to sit down. Melanie was flabbergasted, all her preconceived ideas of how this conversation would go dispersed in one fell swoop. She looked blankly at the other occupant of the table, who had risen also at her arrival but who now was sinking back on to the banquette, and the colour surged hotly to her cheeks at the cynical derision in his light eyes. 'Michael—' she began, only to be silenced as he said: 'Look, Melanie, I know this has come as a great sur­prise to you, and I know you're going to feel initially that I've been working behind the scenes as it were, but actu­ally Mr. Bothwell - whom you know, of course - is down here to complete the deal for Monkshood!'

Melanie's lips parted, and she turned questioning eyes to her fiancé. *CY-* yes?' she said.

'Yes.' Michael sighed, chafing one of her hands between his two. 'Darling, I know nothing definite has really been decided about the house, but I know you were wavering ...'

'Was I?' Melanie tried desperately to gather her scat­tered wits. 'Michael, I don't really understand—'

Scan Bothwell intervened. Leaning towards her across the table, he pinioned her with his eyes. 'What your fiance is trying to explain to you, Miss Stewart, is that he wants you to sell Monkshood and he has contacted me through die solicitors asking me to make an offer for the place.'

His eyes challenged hers; they challenged her to say that she already knew, that they had met the previous evening and that all this had been settled then! But how could she when to do so would inevitably create a situ­ation that was likely to get out of hand?

'I - I—' she shook her head helplessly, and Michael went on quickly:

'Naturally, I didn't expect Mr. Bothwell to come down here in person, but he's here now, and we've got to get this settled one way or the other.'

Melanie was beginning to feel calmer. 'Do you mean to tell me, Michael, that you've contacted McDougall and Price behind my back?' she inquired, in a taut voice. Michael looked slightly discomfited. 'Yes. I was acting on your behalf, Melanie. I knew you would agree that it was the only course possible in the circumstances, and as we're getting married so soon—'

'But I wanted you to see the house!' exclaimed Mel­anie. 'How can you just dismiss Monkshood without even seeing it?'

'I don't think Mr. Croxley sees any point in owning a property from which he will gain so little benefit.' Sean Bothwell was lighting a cigar as he spoke. 'I understand he would prefer you to sell Monkshood and buy a house nearer London.'

'Monkshood is mine, Mr. Bothwell,' Melanie said through clenched teeth. 'And while I know perfectly well what Mr. Croxley would like, I believe the decision is mine!'

'Melanie, please!' Michael looked imploringly at her. 'No one disputes your right of ownership. All we're trying to do here is come to a definite decision regard­ing the property. As Mr. Bothwell says, I can see no point—'

'You won't even try to understand, will you?' Melanie felt an immense feeling of frustration. That Michael should go behind her back was bad enough without having Bothwell's sardonic attention to everything that was said between them. Why hadn't Michael told her that he had arranged this meeting, forewarned her of what to expect, instead of placing her in an impossible position? Her eyes flickered to Scan Bothwell. Was it his fault? Had this meeting been his idea? Another way of humiliating her, perhaps?

The wine waiter brought sherry for Melanie and she sipped it gratefully. Then the first course was served and for a time conversation lapsed apart from occasional comments about the food. Michael kept glancing in her direc­tion, however, and she knew he was very concerned about the outcome of these talks. She compressed her lips. She had wanted to please him, but by his very actions he had proved that he considered her participation an indifferent necessity.

Towards the end of the meal Bothwell said: 'Tell me, Miss Stewart, if you do intend to keep Monkshood, when do you plan to come back there?'

Michael glanced at Melanie, and she pushed her unfinished plate of strawberry mousse aside. 'Does it matter?' she queried coolly.

Bothwell shrugged. 'It helps to know how long I'm ex­pected to caretake the place.'

'You offered to do it,' she reminded him sharply.

'I know it. I'm not refusing the task. I'm merely en­deavouring to ascertain your plans.'

'You're endeavouring to show my fiance that Monkshood is a needless waste of money,' Melanie flared.

Bothwell's light eyes flickered. 'Am I doing that?'

Melanie bent her head. What was he trying to do? Why did he persist in treating her like some irresponsible teenager? What had caused him to have such a low opinion of her?

Michael listened to this interchange carefully. 'You mean you're paying Mr. Bothwell for the upkeep of the house?' he questioned.

Melanie sighed. 'A little.'

'What exactly does it entail?'

'The lighting of fires - purchase of fuel - that sort of thing.' Sean spoke quietly but distinctly.

Melanie stared at him. 'There was a store of fuel out­side the house.'

'Nothing lasts forever,' observed her tormentor. 'I bought half a ton of coke last week.'

Melanie seethed and Michael's expression was grim. 'Really, Melanie,' he exclaimed, 'have you any idea what a drain on your resources this house will become?'

Melanie clenched her fists. 'It wouldn't be considered a drain if the house was being put to some use.'

'Such as what?' Michael's good humour was evapor­ating, and his conciliatory concern for Melanie's attitude was vanishing beneath a tide of impatience. Money had always the upper hand in Michael's affairs and it infuri­ated him that Melanie should be wasting her own allow­ance on a useless building that could never be anything more than a white elephant to them.

'We could live there!' snapped Melanie, throwing cau­tion to the wind. She knew it was ridiculous; impossible to suggest that Michael might throw up his excellent partnership in London and move to a remote area of Scotland, but he had really caught her on the raw and she didn't much care how irresponsible her arguments might be. Anything to wipe the smug expressions off both their faces.

'Move to Scotland!' Michael was saying with exagger­ated sarcasm. 'Oh, you're being unreasonable, Melanie! I don't know what's the matter with you! You simply won't see sense!'

Melanie stared at him for a moment longer, and then with a baleful glance in Sean's direction she got to her feet and marched out of the restaurant. She heard Mich­ael call her name, but she ignored him and stepped into the frosty air breathing deeply.

She heard the restaurant doors open and steps behind her, and as there were no taxis in the vicinity, she began to walk briskly down the street. But the footsteps quickened and a moment later Michael fell into step beside her.

He caught her arm, but she shook off his hand, and he heaved a heavy sigh. 'Melanie darling! This is silly. Look, I know I shouldn't have written to Bothwell without your knowledge, but how the hell was I to know he would come to London? It put me in a dastardly position, and when he suggested we all lunched together, what could I say?'

Melanie halted. '*He* suggested we lunched together?'

'Of course. You don't imagine I'd have sprung it on you like that, do you?'

Melanie hesitated. No, of course. That would not be Michael's way. He was adept at choosing the most suitable moment, and when that moment came along he would have disarmed her in such a way that when the topic was introduced she was already half way to agree­ing with him. It was typically Bothwell to confront her with the *fait accompli* in the hope of achieving an unex­pected advantage.

Even so, Michael's actions spoke for themselves, and she could not altogether forgive him for that. Turning aside, she said:

'You should have consulted me before writing to the solicitors. I had the right to know. Just because we're engaged, that doesn't mean ...' She sighed. 'Well, anyway, that doesn't change the situation now. What do you expect me to do?'

'Darling, I don't expect you to do anything. I thought - I mean, after our conversation when you got back from Scotland - I assumed you actually wanted to sell Monks­hood. My actions were simply to save you the trouble of all the legal work involved. I intended to explain every­thing to you once I had Bothwell's offer in writing and a copy of the deeds to hand. Surely you can understand that.'

Melanie sighed. 'But just now, in the restaurant—'

'Forget what I said in the restaurant!' he advised her, gently, 'After all, what could I say? I could hardly take your part in front of a man who is so involved himself, could I ? I mean - situations alter cases, you know they do. As for moving to Scotland - well, that's out of the question and you know it.'

Melanie bent her head, twisting the strap of her hand­bag round her fingers. 'But I don't want to sell Monks­hood,' she persisted. 'I - I spoke to Desmond about it—'

'Oh, Desmond!' Michael's tone was disparaging.

'Yes, Desmond!' Melanie's eyes challenged his as she looked up. 'He's been a good friend to me and he said there was no earthly need why I should decide right away.'

'And what if Bothwell changes his mind about buying in the process?' Michael was endeavouring to remain un­disturbed.

'What does it matter? There are other people willing to buy the place.'

'Not for ten thousand pounds, there aren't?' Michael retorted ungrammatically.

*'Ten thousand pounds!'*

Melanie echoed the words disbelievingly. 'You mean Bothwell—'

'Exactly.' Michael was triumphant.

Melanie's brows drew together in a puzzled frown. 'But where would he get that kind of money?'

Now Michael looked perturbed. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, just what I say. Sean Bothwell isn't a rich man. He owns the hotel at Cairnside, I know, but that's not a particularly paying proposition, I shouldn't have thought. And his brother and sister share the admin­istration with him. How could he possibly afford ten thousand pounds?' Then a thought suddenly struck her and she looked at Michael with distrustful eyes. 'Who suggested that sum anyway? I mean - Monkshood simply isn't worth that amount of money.'

Michael ran a finger round the inside of his collar. 'That's not for you to say, Melanie,' he adjured her brusquely. 'When one is selling a property, one doesn't question the merits of whether or not the property is worth what one is asking, particularly if one's client is agreeable—'

Melanie compressed her lips. 'I - well, that's not en­tirely true,' she murmured unhappily, remembering the way Sean Bothwell had told her that he was determined to get Monkshood at any cost. In the circumstances, she should be grateful to Michael for getting her such a con­siderable sum, but all she could think of was that Michael had a vested interest and his dealings were as much for himself as for her. 'You must remember that this is not a simple matter—'

'So far as you're concerned, it is,' replied Michael, a trifle curtly, as though he found Melanie's uncertainty frustrating.

Melanie shook her head. 'I don't want to sell the house, Michael,' she persisted.

Michael sighed. 'But why? *Why?* We can't live there! It's a drain on your income! What possible use is it to us?'

Melanie glanced round unhappily. 'I'll tell you, Mich­ael. If I don't keep Monkshood for myself, I shall prob­ably give it away.'

*'Give it away!'* Michael was flabbergasted now.

Yes.' Melanie had been thinking carefully. 'Look, I don't like Bothwell, and I know he doesn't like me, but that doesn't alter the fact that he is my uncle's son and therefore entitled to the place—'

'I never heard such arrant nonsense!' Michael was furious now. 'Melanie, you must be out of your mind! You can't give such a valuable property away!'

'It is mine, Michael,' she reminded him quietly.

'We'll be married in eight or nine weeks! Surely I have the right to give you the benefit of my advice!'

'You know you have, Michael. But in this instance, I've got to make up my own mind.'

'Not caring whom you hurt in the process, is that it?'

'Of course not.' Melanie bit her lip. 'Michael, you say I'm unreasonable, and yet you refuse to come up to Scot­land with me and see it for yourself. Surely that's un­reasonable?'

'What possible good would it serve?' Michael thrust his hands into his pockets. Flakes of snow were beginning to fall again and it was bitterly cold standing there in the street. 'Look, come back to the restaurant—'

'No!' Melanie was adamant. She would not go back there to confront Sean Bothwell yet again.

'Well, I'll have to go back.' Michael made an expressive gesture. 'What must I tell Bothwell?'

Melanie shrugged. 'That's for you to decide. You'll have to tell him I'm not selling Monkshood after all. As to whether I decide to give him the house ...' She sighed. 'It's too soon to tell. I must go back there and see the place again for myself.'

Michael turned away. He was obviously finding it difficult to control his temper and Melanie knew he thought she was making a fool of him. But what had he done to her, acting behind her back, trying to create an atmosphere where it would be impossible for her to back down? She guessed he had decided to leave the matter for now. He could return to it at some later date when cir­cumstances might be more tipped in his direction.

'All right,' he said now. 'I'll tell him you're not interested. He'll most likely think you're crazy! Not to mention charging me for his expenses into the bargain.'

Melanie drew on her gloves. 'I must go. It's getting late.'

'Will I see you this evening?'

'If you like.' Melanie was indifferent.

'I'll come round after dinner. I guess you aren't interested in dining out.'

'Not tonight.' Melanie managed a faint smile. 'G'bye.'

Michael hesitated and then leant forward to touch her lips with his. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'We'll work some­thing out.'

Melanie nodded and hurried away. The cold was in­vading her system and she felt chilled to her stomach. Nothing was the same any more; not her work, nor Michael, nor her life. In the space of a few short weeks her sense of values had changed to such an extent that she no longer thought in terms of what was financially suitable and what was not. Before Christmas, before she had visited Monkshood, the idea of being offered the choice between a derelict mansion in Scotland and ten thousand pounds would have amused her enormously, and cer­tainly she would have had no qualms about choosing the money. But now the money mattered less than her own peace of mind, and while she had told Michael that she was thinking of giving Monkshood away almost on the spur of the moment the idea had entered her mind and taken root. It would certainly solve a lot of problems, but maybe create some more. At least it would absolve her from a feeling of guilt, and show Bothwell that she was not as black as he had painted her. But why should she care what Bothwell thought of her? Why should it matter? He was nothing to her, and he had treated her abominably.

She hailed a taxi and huddled in a corner of the back seat she tried to analyse her emotions. She was behaving foolishly and she must take a hold on herself. As Michael had said, they were getting married soon. His mother already had the arrangements in hand as Melanie had no parents of her own to .handle things. Soon she would be having fittings for her dress, her bridesmaids would be chosen ... What was she doing jeopardizing her future like this? Michael was not the kind of man to stand her indifferent treatment of him for long. He was not exactly conceited, but he was aware that he was an eligible indi­vidual, and it would not take him long to replace Melanie with some society beauty. Whether or not he would love her would be immaterial. The physical aspect of their relationship had never been a passionate one, and Mel­anie had respected Michael's restraint. But was it re­straint, or did he not perhaps find that aspect of marriage somewhat distasteful? Certainly she could never imagine Michael subjecting himself fastidiously to a wildly ec­static union with any woman, but until meeting Bothwell and experiencing his lovemaking Melanie had never felt dissatisfied.

It was all Bothwell's fault, she told herself bitterly. Without his intervention at Monkshood she would most likely have decided to sell the house at the finish and would never have got herself into this impossible situ­ation.

She stared gloomily out of the cab window realizing they were almost to her office. How she wished there was someone, someone who was not involved directly or in­directly, to whom she could turn. But there was no one. She would have to decide for herself whether indeed Michael was right and sever her connections with the house once and for all.

CHAPTER NINE

Melanie was in the process of washing up the dishes she had used to make herself a snack that evening when her doorbell rang. She dried her hands, took off the apron she had been wearing, and walked through the living-room to the door. She was expecting Michael and she had dressed casually in black velvet pants and a jungle-printed over- blouse that tied at her waist.

However, when she opened the door, it was not Mich­ael she found leaning casually against the door jamb but Sean Bothwell.

Taken aback, but controlling her expression, she said: 'Oh, good evening, Mr. Bothwell. This is a surprise.'

'You said that last evening,' he remarked laconically, straightening. 'May I come in?'

Melanie hesitated. 'I really can't see any point in in­viting you in,' she said. 'Surely Michael explained to you at lunchtime—'

'Your fiance was most explicit,' returned Bothwell, nodding. 'Indeed, I would go so far as to say that he was positively eloquent. He obviously believes that pushed too far you may do something completely irresponsible, and he daren't risk that.'

Melanie sighed. 'Well then ...'

'There are certain matters to discuss if you are to retain possession of the house,' Bothwell stated.

'Such as what?'

'Such as - my renting it from you, for instance.'

'But you told me you weren't interested in sharing the house 1 You said so yourself.'

'I know I did. However, at that time I was still not convinced that you could not be persuaded to sell.3

Melanie raised her eyebrows. 'You'd better come in, then.'

'Thank you.'

He allowed her to precede him into the living-room, closing the outer door behind him and loosening his over­coat. Melanie waved a careless hand to a chair, but he apparently preferred to stand, so she did too.

'Now,' she said, trying to be businesslike, 'what did you have in mind?'

'Tenancy - based on a year-to-year contract.'

'But - but if I agree to that, I shan't be able to use the house myself at all.'

'Is that likely in any event?' His light eyes were glint­ing sardonically.

'What do you mean?'

He raised a conciliatory hand. 'Nothing - nothing!'

'If my fiance has made things clear to you, you must know that I have no intention of abandoning Monkshood completely. I'm hoping to persuade him when die weather improves—'

'Oh, please!1 Sean Bothwell raked a hand through his thick hair. 'I don't want to know what you plan to do with Mr. Croxley; all I'm interested in is making my pos­ition a solid one.'

'That's all very well, Mr. Bothwell, but didn't Michael explain that—'

'Your fiance and I had a very satisfactory discussion on the matter,' remarked Bothwell. 'However, whether or not you would consider it satisfying is quite another thing.'

'If my fiance has misled you - if he's given you to understand that—'

'I am perfectly aware of your fiance's feelings in the matter,' he interrupted her again. 'Indeed, I might go so far as to say that I endorse his objections. But for the moment, I'm prepared to take the line of least resistance. However, I am not prepared—'

'Just a minute.' Melanie looked up at him. 'Are you trying to tell me that Michael has made you some prop­osition?'

'Heavens, no!' Bothwell's light eyes glinted. 'Did I say so?'

'No, but you're making some particularly insinuative statements!' Melanie hesitated. 'I think it might be best if we left any decisions in the matter until I've inspected the house again.'

'Inspected the house!' he echoed incredulously. 'You can't mean you're planning to come back there?'

'Of course.'

'I see.' Bothwell smote his fist against his thigh. 'So you really are adamant. I wish to God I knew why!'

'Does it matter?'

'Of course it matters, damn you!' His expression was angry. 'I've offered you a more than generous price for Monkshood! I've even travelled all this way to clinch the deal and save you a journey north, and you still persist in behaving like a spoilt child with a new toy!'

Melanie was hurt and angry herself now. 'Maybe if you stopped treating me as a fractious child or an irrespon­sible woman by turns I would be easier to get along with!' she snapped.

Bothwell stepped towards her, breathing deeply. 'What is that supposed to mean? How do you want me to treat you? I was right the other evening, wasn't I? I disap­pointed you because I didn't take up your generous offer of a bed for the night—'

'You swine!'

Melanie glared at him with tormented eyes, and before she could move he reached out and dragged her body closely against his. A hand on either side of her head, he forced her mouth up to his and after an initial moment of restraint Melanie found herself responding to him wildly. It was degrading, but he was right, this was what she wanted, and her arms slid round his waist beneath his coat and jacket, only his thin silk shirt between her and his warm skin. Her lips parted beneath the devastating onslaught of his mouth and she felt his fingers sliding the blouse from her shoulder, and presently his mouth burned her skin with demanding urgency. She was burning up inside and he said in thickened tones: 'Love me - and I'll love you ...'

Melanie's throat tightened. What was she doing? Had she lost her reason? Why was she allowing this man to touch her as she would never allow Michael to touch her, even in the remote event that he might want to do so? Why did her body melt into wanton desires as soon as his hands caressed her? Why did the hardness of his body against hers destroy all her normal inhibitions? She felt his hands in her hair, tipping her head back so that he could kiss her throat, and then the doorbell rang!

Melanie found the unexpected sound acted like a douche of cold water on her inflamed emotions, and she tore herself out of his arms unsteadily. He stood looking at her solemnly, his eyes still glazed by the intensity of his emotions even though his expression was cynical.

Melanie buttoned her blouse with trembling fingers, and threaded her fingers through her hair. 'It - it must be Michael!' she said.

'You look concerned, Miss Stewart.' He was scathing. 'Have you lost your nerve?'

She wanted to hit out at him then, to hurt him as he was hurting her, but there was no time. The doorbell rang again.

'Go on, answer the door, Miss Stewart.' Sean took off his overcoat and flung it over a chair. 'My reasons for being here are legitimate ones, aren't they?'

'But-but—'

'Don't alarm yourself! I shan't abuse your fiance's faith in you by relating your shortcomings to him. What you do is not of the least importance to me, except so far as Monkshood is concerned.'

'Oh, Monkshood! Monkshood! I'm sick of the sound of that name!' Melanie was near to tears.

'You'd better answer the door,' Sean Bothwell ob­served, straightening his tie, 'or he really will begin to think the worst!'

Melanie cast him one last baleful glance and walked reluctantly to the door. As she unfastened the Yale lock the bell rang again and when she finally drew open the door Michael walked in rather impatiently. 'Where were you?' he was beginning, when he saw Bothwell. 'You! What are you doing here?'

Sean Bothwell looked not in the least perturbed, and Melanie could scarcely credit that barely five minutes ago he had been making passionate love to her. He had smoothed his hair, and his suit was as immaculate as ever, and Michael's more finely cut suit and pale lilac shirt looked rather effeminate in comparison. Michael was taller than the other man, but not so broad, and in conse­quence he was inclined to gauntness, particularly after his bout of cold.

'I came to see Miss Stewart about renting Monkshood,' Sean was saying now, offering Michael a cigar which he accepted. 'I thought - in the circumstances - she would prefer it that way.'

Michael hesitated, obviously trying to decide whether or not Bothwell was mocking him. Then he said: 'Are you going to rent the house, Melanie?'

Melanie had had just about enough. 'I don't know,' she said through clenched teeth, 'and if you imagine I'm going to spend the evening discussing Monkshood then you're very much mistaken!'

Michael looked at Sean. 'Have you been here long?'

Sean shrugged. 'Just a few minutes. Terrible night, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is.' Michael was obviously finding it difficult to act naturally. 'Er - shall we have a drink, Melanie?'

'I'm just leaving,' said Sean, lifting his overcoat with casual ease. 'We can discuss this later, Miss Stewart.'

'Yes.' Melanie was abrupt, and Michael looked at her closely.

:Do go on,' he suggested, but Melanie shook her head.

'It's too soon,' she asserted, more calmly than she felt. 'I -1 need time to think.'

Bothwell held out his hand to Michael and they shook hands while Melanie looked on dumbly. How could Sean Bothwell behave so outrageously? She wished there was some way she could disconcert him as he was continually disconcerting her.

'Goodbye, Miss Stewart.' Bothwell was holding out his hand to her now and she had perforce to take it, but she snatched her hand away as soon as she felt the coolness of his palm. She felt she hated him and she didn't know why.

She accompanied him to the door, but avoided his eyes, and there was no way he could communicate with her without Michael being aware of it. However, he did say: 'I'm sure we'll meet again, Miss Stewart,' with insinuative sarcasm, and Melanie closed the door with trembling fingers.

Back in the living-room Michael had risen to his feet and was standing with his back to her electric fire. He looked put out and Melanie knew he was waiting for some sort of explanation.

'Well!' he said, rather pompously. 'That fellow has some nerve, coming here like that! Why did you let him in? You should have told him I was in charge of your affairs.'

Melanie folded her hands. 'He already knows that, Michael. Besides, I could hardly speak to him in the cor­ridor, could I?' She waved an expressive hand. 'Oh, let's change the subject. I'm sick of the whole affair.'

'That's all very well.' Michael was not to be put off. 'Exactly how well do you know him? He seemed very much at home here.'

Melanie clenched her fists. 'I don't know him very well,' she said tautly. 'But he's that kind of man. He makes himself at home wherever he goes. He - well, you know yourself what manner of man he is.'

Michael looked brooding. 'Even so, his presence here was not to my liking and I wish you wouldn't entertain him again. If you have business matters to discuss, I should be present, and your apartment is not the place to discuss them. I have a perfectly adequate office for business affairs.'

'You started this!' she reminded him hotly. 'You wrote to him in the first place! I was quite prepared to let it ride for the time being.'

Michael tapped a hand impatiently against his thigh. 'I don't wish to go into that again, Melanie. All right, we'll let it drop for the time being, but I'm not satisfied about it.'

Melanie smoothed her hair with a careless hand, trying not to speculate on what might have happened had Michael not put in his appearance as he did. What was wrong with her? She had never considered herself an ir­responsible creature, incapable of knowing her own mind, and yet these days she seemed to be constantly trying to analyse her motives for acting as she did. And the results of these self-analyses were not comforting.

The rest of the evening passed slowly, and Melanie was greatly relieved when Michael finally took his leave. If he thought her preoccupied he made no mention of the fact, and Melanie could only assume that this was because he was preoccupied himself. What was happening to them? she asked herself desperately. Things had never been like this between them in the past. How could they contem­plate marriage when at the moment they were so tense with each other over such a little thing?

To her surprise, in the days that followed she heard no more from Sean Bothwell. She had half expected he would contact her, but when he did not she had to accept that he had returned to Cairnside. Life resumed a sem­blance of normality after that and using work as an anti­dote to despair, Melanie completed the drawings for Agnes Bowman's story. Desmond was pleased with them and suggested he bought her and Michael dinner one evening, and they were pleased to accept. It was quite like old times, Melanie thought, relieved, and as Desmond brought his wife, Lydia, they made a foursome.

They dined at the Savoy Grill and went on to a night­club. For once Michael seemed relaxed and uninhibited, and dancing with him Melanie began to believe her anxieties had all been the result of an overcharged imagination.

Later, the two men got absorbed in conversation with a film producer friend of Desmond's and Lydia and Mel­anie were left to themselves.

'How many weeks is it now to your wedding?' Lydia asked, with interest. She was a small, dainty little woman with greying red hair and a warm and gentle personality. Melanie liked her enormously and now turned to her eagerly, saying:

'Just six weeks, Lydia. I'm going down to Michael's home at the weekend to have my first fitting for my wed­ding dress.'

'How marvellous!' Lydia sighed wistfully. 'I wish I was just at that stage again - looking forward to my wedding and so on. It seems impossible that Desmond and I should have been married for fifteen years.'

Melanie tipped her head on one side. 'But they've been happy years, haven't they?'

'Oh, yes.' Lydia was adamant about that.

'There you are, then.' Melanie lifted her shoulders and then let them fall again. 'I don't know how I shall make out as a wife. Or a mother!'

Lydia shrugged. 'These things come naturally to a woman. Don't worry, you'll manage. Where are you going to live? In town, or the country?'

Melanie raised her eyebrows. 'In town, of course. We don't have anywhere else to live.'

'No?' Lydia frowned. 'But I understood Michael was negotiating for the Bradburys' cottage. You know the place. It's not far from Meddleham, where we have our cottage.'

'The Bradburys' cottage?' Melanie's brows drew together confusedly. 'You mean - Owen Bradbury, the antique collector who died last year?'

'Yes.' Lydia frowned. 'Oh, dear, hasn't he told you? I hope I'm not spoiling a surprise.'

'No, no, of course not. Go on!' Melanie leant towards her urgently.

Lydia hesitated. 'I really don't know whether I should—'

'Don't be silly, Lydia. You've spilled half the beans now, you might as well spill the rest.' Melanie managed to retain a note of amusement in her voice even while inside she was beginning to feel those familiar pangs of frustration and resentment.

Lydia sighed, but she was an inveterate story-teller, and this was too good to miss. 'Well, actually, it was Des­mond who told me,' she said. 'In the beginning, anyway, lie saw Michael having lunch with Virginia Bradbury some weeks ago.'

'Virginia Bradbury?'

'Yes. She's the widow of Owen Bradbury, of course. She's much younger than he was. She was his third wife, and I believe she's only in her late thirties and looks much younger. When Desmond first saw them together he actu­ally had a word with Michael about it, because he's very fond of you and he - well, you can imagine what went through his mind.'

'Yes.' Melanie swallowed hard. 'And what did Michael say?'

'Well, that was when he explained that the Bradburys' affairs were in his hands, and he was advising Virginia on selling the cottage. He didn't tell Desmond he was buying the place, of course, he just explained his reasons for lunching with her. It was later, at the cottage, that some friends of ours who know Virginia told us that she was hoping to sell the place to Michael.'

'I see.' Melanie lay back in her seat, her brain buzzing with what she had just heard. No wonder Michael didn't want her to keep Monkshood if he had this cottage lined up for them. Her expression softened momentarily. Was this why he was adamant about her selling? she wondered regretfully. Had she misjudged him to that extent?

Turning back to Lydia, she said: 'Don't mention this when the men come back, will you? I shouldn't like Michael to think I had been checking up on him.'

Lydia nodded. 'Of course not. I wonder how long they're going to leave us alone. I could do with another drink.'

Melanie smiled. All of a sudden things seemed much brighter, and she thought rather reluctantly that this altered everything. If Michael was going to present her with a country cottage as a wedding present, how annoy­ing it must be for him when she persistently made such a thing about Monkshood.

Going home that evening in a cab, she slid her arm through Michael's and nestled her head against his shoul­der. Michael hesitated for only a moment before curving his arm about her and pressing his lips to her hair.

'Michael!' she murmured drowsily. 'Have you ever thought of buying a house in the country?' and as she felt him stiffen, she hastened on: 'Near London, I mean.'

Michael drew in his breath sharply. 'Why do you ask?'

Melanie sighed. 'I just wondered.'

'Has Graham said something to you?'

Melanie lifted her head. 'Desmond? No, why? Should he have done?'

Michael's brows drew together. 'I'm curious as to why you should bring this up this evening.'

Melanie bit her lip. 'All right, Michael. Lydia told me.'

'About the Bradburys' cottage?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so. She - she didn't realize she was speaking out of turn—'

'I see.' Michael clicked his tongue impatiently.

'Well, does it matter?' Melanie touched his cheek ten­tatively. 'I think it's a wonderful idea, and I'm only sorry I spoiled things with Monkshood.'

Michael caught her hand in his. 'You mean - you mean - you've changed your mind?'

Melanie frowned now. 'Changed my mind?' she echoed.

'Yes. About keeping Monkshood?'

'Oh, I see. Having two houses would be silly, wouldn't it, I suppose?' Melanie heaved a sigh.

'We couldn't afford two,' Michael observed practically. 'Besides, this cottage of the Bradburys' will take almost all the ten thousand we get for Monkshood—'

Melanie's senses sharpened acutely, and she pushed herself away from Michael with unconcealed horror in her voice as she said: 'You don't mean to tell me you expect *me* to buy the Bradburys' cottage!' she. gasped in amazement.

Michael ran a finger round the inside of his tight collar. 'For heaven's sake, Melanie, what did you think I meant?'

Melanie lay back in her seat, stunned, her brain still functioning with brilliant clarity. 'You can't be serious!' she exclaimed.

But even as she said the words another thought struck her.

'Was this why you wrote to Scan Bothwell?' she de­manded sickly. 'Was this why you contacted him without my knowledge? Was it the Bradburys' cottage that aroused your interest?'

Michael tried to take her hands, but she pushed him away. 'Melanie, please, don't make a scene here! The driver can probably hear what we're saying!'

Melanie's lips twisted. 'Do you think I care? Do you think I'm bothered about what anyone thinks? Oh, Michael, I was angry with you before, but it was nothing compared to this! How could you! *How could you!'*

'Melanie! You're being melodramatic! Once we're married Monkshood will be as much mine as yours, re­member that!'

'But we won't be married, Michael!' Breathing chok­ingly, Melanie snatched off her engagement ring and thrust it into his hand. 'Take your ring! Pawn it! Maybe you'll find enough to pay the deposit on the Bradburys' cottage yourself!'

Michael's face was suffused with colour. Melanie could see the unhealthy marks on his cheeks, and she rapped on the partition to attract the driver's attention indi­cating he should stop. When he did so she jumped out, and before Michael could guess what she intended to do she waved the driver on. By the time Michael stopped the cab again, Melanie had disappeared down a side street and was lost to view.

Later, much later, the telephone pealed insistently, but Melanie refused to answer it. She lay face down on her bed, crying as she had never cried before.

In the morning she was puffy-eyed and tired, but she went in to the office and immediately Desmond saw that something was wrong. Approaching her board, he drew off the dark glasses she had donned to hide her eyes and said:

'Come into the office! I want to talk to you.'

Melanie didn't much want to talk to anybody, but she could hardly refuse when Desmond paid her salary, so she went with him. Once there, Desmond seated her in an armchair, and handed her a cup of black coffee.

'Now,' he said, 'what's happened? I gather from Lydia that she rather let the cat out of the bag last night.'

'Thank God she did!' said Melanie fervently. 'Oh, you might as well know it all; Michael contacted Bothwell because he wanted the money from Monkshood to buy the Bradburys' cottage.'

'What?'

'You heard what I said. Michael wanted the money for his own purposes. When Lydia first told me, I was charmed!' She gave a short mirthless laugh. 'I actually thought that he intended to buy the cottage to surprise me. I was even going to tell him that I would sell Monks­hood after all. The money could have gone into the bank for emergencies and so on. I never dreamt—' She shook her head mutely.

Desmond heaved a sigh, lighting a cigarette. 'I see. Even so, Melanie—'

'Even so, nothing! I - I just don't want to talk about it.'

'You're not wearing your ring.'

'Our engagement's over!'

'Ob, no!' Desmond raked a hand through his hair. 'Look here, Melanie, I can't help feeling that this is in some way my fault. After all, if I hadn't seen Michael lunching with Virginia and told Lydia—'

'Oh, don't blame yourself, Desmond. I'm glad really. Oh, I know I don't look it at the moment, but - well, things haven't been too good between Michael and me since I inherited Monkshood. We would never see eye to eye about that.'

'But Michael was telling me last night that the question of Monkshood had been settled—'

'Well, it hasn't.' Melanie drank some of the aromatic black liquid from her cup. 'In fact - well, I'm thinking of going up there for a while.'

'What? To live, you mean?'

'Let us say - for a holiday,' airfended Melanie quietly, '1,00k, Desmond, you can understand this, can't you? I mean - if I stay in London, Michael is bound to try and get in touch with me. He simply won't believe I've turned him down—'

'And have you?'

'Yes,' Melanie nodded. 'I don't intend going back on what I've said.'

Desmond shook his head. 'But, Melanie, if you love Michael—'

'That' 's just the point,' said Melanie with piercing per­ception. 'I don't love him. I don't think I ever did. I think I used him, if you like, and he used me. That was all there ever was.'

'Oh, Melanie, you're not serious! Why, I've seen you two together. You make a handsome couple.'

'Maybe we do.' Melanie smiled rather cynically. 'But you don't marry people because you look good together...'

'I know that. I just meant—''

'I know what you meant, Desmond, but I'm sorry. I shan't change my mind. It's over, and do you know, deep down, I'm glad!'

CHAPTER TEN

Melanie drove up to Scotland a week later.

She had intended to get away sooner, but there was more to do than she had believed possible before she could leave for an indefinite period, and she was grateful to Desmond for his help and understanding. She knew he still felt bad about the whole business and he could not wholly accept that she and Michael were through. Indeed, she was sure he believed that after a couple of weeks by herself Melanie would come rushing back to London to take up her engagement again.

But Melanie herself had no doubts. Sometimes, in fact, she felt an enormous feeling of relief at knowing she was a free woman again. And when she did eventually come back to London it would not be to see Michael.

Michael viewed the situation differently. He was of the opinion that their quarrel was merely a continuation of their differences over Monkshood, and he could see nothing wrong in what he had tried to do. But to Melanie it had been an eye-opening example of Michael's selfishness and egotism, and the small doubts which had troubled her before had erupted into one huge ball of resentment.

He telephoned regularly, mostly to the office, as quite often Melanie did not answer the phone in her apart­ment. After one abortive effort to see her at home, he had actually come to the office, but Desmond had been pre­sent the whole time and Michael was not the kind of man to make a scene in public. Once he had waited for her after work, and then there had been no avoiding him, but Melanie had realized by then that only by speaking to Michael herself could she ever hope to convince him that he was wasting his time.

They had gone to a cellar bar, and although Melanie refused anything but a fruit juice Michael drank several strong whiskies and got rather tight. She felt sorry for him, if only because his supreme self-confidence had been shattered, but that was all.

After that, he made no further attempts to see her, and Melanie wondered what he would think when he found she had left London. Maybe he would take up with Vir­ginia Bradbury himself, if she would have him. From all accounts, she was a very attractive young woman, and certainly she had the kind of connections he could use, Melanie thought cynically.

The weather driving north was not as dramatic as it had been before Christmas. An unexpected thaw had melted a lot of the snow, and this had caused flooding in places which was equally hazardous. She stayed over­night in Glasgow, and drove on to Cairnside the fol­lowing morning, a feeling of excitement and expectancy overtaking her.

She arrived at the Black Bull late in the afternoon, as the grey light was fading and evening was setting in. Everything looked different somehow, the trees having shed their coats of snow showing up black against the snow-smudged hillside. There was still quite a lot of snow lying about, but the roads were clear and the forecourt of the hotel was brushed and almost dry.

It took a great deal of nerve to park her car and walk into the hotel, particularly as she knew that if they re­fused to accommodate her she had nowhere else to go. Monkshood was without light or heating, and besides, where would she sleep? In Angus Cairney's bed?

The reception hall was deserted, and with trepidation she rang the bell on the desk. After a few minutes, the door which led into that comfortable room behind the desk opened and Helen Bothwell came through. Her eyes widened incredulously as she saw who it was, and she approached the desk almost reluctantly.

'Yes?' she questioned brusquely.

Melanie compressed her lips. 'I'd like a room - my room back again.'

'I see.' Helen tapped a lacquered nail against the hotel register. T)o you intend staying long?'

Melanie shrugged. 'I'm not sure. It depends. Does it matter?'

'We may not have room,' replied Helen shortly, flicking over the pages of the ledger.

'But last time I came, you said—'

'That was before Christmas,' retorted Helen. 'I'll have to see about it.'

Melanie controlled her impatience. 'Very well. I'll go into the bar and have a drink if I may?'

'Of course.' Helen was indifferent, and Melanie walked quickly across to the swing doors leading into the bar lounge.

Jeffrey was still behind the bar, polishing glasses, and he too looked positively astounded to see her. 'Well, hello,' he exclaimed cheerfully. 'You're a sight for sore eyes!'

'I'm glad you think so.' Melanie perched on a stool by the bar. 'Can I have a Scotch and dry ginger, please? I'm feeling rather in need of it.' She frowned as he went to get her order. 'But why are you still here? I thought college started at the end of January.'

Jeffrey raised his eyebrows, as he pushed a glass and a small bottle of ginger towards her. 'So it did. But things have been pretty difficult here and I offered to stay on.'

'I see.' Melanie sipped her drink. 'Is everything all right? No one's ill or any tiling, are they?'

Jeffrey began polishing glasses. 'Not here exactly,' he said slowly. 'It's Jennie, actually.'

'Jennie - Craig?' Melanie stared at him.

'That's right. You met her, didn't you?'

'Of course. What's wrong?'

'Well, you'll know of course that she isn't a strong person. I mean - she never has been. She's always been prone to coughs and colds - that sort of thing. But - well, circumstances being what they are, she's gradually got worse. A few weeks ago she became ill with bronchitis, and it's affected her heart. She's confined to bed at the moment, and it doesn't look good.'

'Oh, no!' Melanie stared at him. 'How awful!' She made a helpless gesture. 'I suppose - your brother - has been pretty worried.'

'We all have,' agreed Jeffrey, sighing. 'Naturally Sean takes it badly. He's pretty attached to her.'

'Yes.\*

Melanie was aware of a sharp pain in the region of her stomach as Jeffrey spoke and an awful feeling of unease descended upon her. All the way from London, she had felt a suppressed feeling of excitement, and although she had never actually allied it to Sean Bothwell, she had known it was there. It was useless to tell herself that Monkshood was her only reason for coming to Cairnside, but now the bubble had burst and she felt completely deflated.

'But tell me,' Jeffrey was saying, 'what are you doing here? Have you come to stay?'

Melanie sighed. 'I - I've come to live for a while,' she admitted slowly. At least, that was my intention. I thought I could stay here until Monkshood was habit­able, and then—'

'But I thought...' Jeffrey broke off abruptly, and Mel­anie heard someone crossing the floor towards them.

Swinging round, her cheeks suffusing with colour, she encountered Sean Bothwell's brooding gaze. Dressed in dark pants and a navy silk shirt, open at the throat to reveal the strong column of his throat, he looked stern and angry, and her lower limbs turned to water at the expression in his eyes.

'What are you doing here?'

His first words startled her by their bitterness, and she shook her head helplessly. 'I -1—'

'Don't tell me you've come to inspect your property again! Not after our conversations in London!' He halted before her, feet apart, his hands on his hips.

'As a matter of fact, I've come to live there!' retorted Melanie, sliding off her stool.

*'To live there!'* Sean raised his eyes heavenward. 'What nonsense is this? I understood your fiance—'

'Let's leave my fiance out of this!' snapped Melanie tautly. 'What I choose to do is my business, and mine alone!'

'Not when it involves other people it's not!' retorted Sean angrily. 'Look,' he tried to speak calmly, 'look, if you want to stay at the hotel, okay, I'll arrange it, but let us leave Monkshood until you've had time to reconsider either of my two propositions.'

Melanie looked up at him with as much confidence as she could muster. 'I should have thought at a time like this you wouldn't want to quibble over where I stayed. Jeffrey's been telling me about Jennifer. I'm sorry. How is she?'

Sean looked beyond her to his brother. Then his eyes flickered back to her. 'Jennifer is ill,' he said non-com- mittally. 'But don't let that interfere with your plans!'

Melanie was again struck by the bitterness in his voice as he spoke. With awkward persistence, she said: 'Could I see her? I - I'd like to.'

Sean took a deep breath. 'That may be possible,' he replied. Then he raked a hand through his hair. 'Helen tells me you want your old room back again.'

Tf it's possible, yes.'

Sean stepped aside, leaning on the bar. 'I suppose that can be arranged. You know the times of meals, of course.'

Melanie nodded, hesitating uncertainly. She had not finished her drink, but she no longer wanted it. With another helpless glance in Jeffrey's direction, she turned and walked across the room to the door, conscious of Sean's eyes upon her the whole time.

The following morning, Melanie awoke with an awful sense of foreboding hanging over her head. At first, in those few mellow moments before full consciousness took a hold on her, she could not imagine why she should feel that way, but presently it all came back to her with piercing clarity. She was here in Cairnside, at the Black Bull, and her depression stemmed from the fact that last night, for the first time, she had admitted to herself that in spite of everything, she was in love with Sean Both- well ...

Rolling on to her stomach, she pressed her face into her pillow, trying to blot out her thoughts. How could she have allowed such a thing to happen? How could she have fallen in love with a man who continually treated her without decency or respect? A man, moreover, who regarded her simply as an obstacle to his plans.

She sat up in bed and buried her face in her hands, her dark hair falling curtainlike about her shoulders. She must get a grip on herself. He must never suspect how she felt, or her degradation would be complete.

Sliding out of bed, tucking her hair back behind her ears, she walked to her dressing table and surveyed herself in the mirror. Wide eyes stared back at her, eyes that mirrored a little of the despair she was experiencing. She ran a questing hand over the smooth skin of her shoulder, sliding the dark blue chiffon nightgown aside and regard­ing herself with clinical appraisal. What was there about her that caused Sean Bothwell to despise her so much? What had she done to him that he should hate her so? After all, it was obvious that he cared for Jennifer in a way he could not care for any other woman, so why did he persist in subjecting her to such harsh, unfeeling treat­ment?

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she did not hear a light tap on the panels of her door, and when the door opened she swung round in surprise, expecting to see Josie, the maid.

But it was not Josie who entered her room, closing the door softly behind him, but Sean Bothwell.

Melanie stood, transfixed for a moment, while his light eyes travelled disturbingly down the length of her body in the chiffon nightgown, and then with a gasp she reached for her housecoat.

'I did knock,' he said, rather huskily, as she belted the quilted gown closely about her, her whole body aflame with colour.

'What do you want?' she asked tautly. 'Or is this a kind of *droit de seigneur*?' She was bitter now, unable to face him except behind a screen of indignation.

Sean's expression darkened. 'You have no cause to say that of me!' he snapped.

'Have I not?' Melanie clasped her hands together. 'Why are you here? Is this some old Scottish custom I haven't heard about?'

'Will you stop being shrewish!' His tone was harsh. 'And don't raise your voice. I don't want the whole hotel to know where I am.'

'I'll bet you don't!'

Melanie turned away trembling, crossing to the window and resting against the sill.

'Melanie, listen to me, damn you!' he exclaimed. 'I don't have much time. But I wanted to speak with you privately before you see Jennifer.'

'I am - to see her today?'

'Yes. I was at the house last night, and when I told her you were here, she was delighted. She likes you.'

'I see.' Melanie turned back to him. 'And are you afraid I'll tell her about what happened in London, is that it?'

'No. I don't think you would be so cruel. I simply don't want you to upset her by telling her that any definite decision has been made about Monkshood.'

'Monkshood!' Melanie swallowed hard. Of course. That was why Sean had wanted the house, wasn't it? To use after he married Jennifer.

'That's right,' Sean was saying now. 'Just let it ride. If she asks what you're doing here, you can tell her you came to inspect the place. I don't think she'll press you. She's too weak.1

'I see,' said Melanie again. Then she bent her head, her hair falling about her cheeks in dark disorder. 'I — I — sometimes I wish I'd never inherited the place!'

'So do I,' muttered Sean heavily.

Melanie raised her head, suppressing the pain his words caused her. 'Why do you dislike me so much?' she demanded huskily.

'Dislike you? *Dislike you?* My God! I don't dislike you,' he said, his eyes darkened with emotion. 'I might use more potent epithets, but dislike is not one of them!'

Melanie quivered. 'Do I take it from that that you take your pleasures where you find them? Don't you find making love to a woman you so obviously - *hate* - unac­ceptable?'

Sean took a step towards her and then halted. 'Physi­cally, you have everything,' he said harshly. 'Physically, I want you. Oh, yes, I admit it. All my instincts now demand that I take what is offered. Do you think that when I saw you standing there in that slip of chiffon, I didn't want to make love to you? I did? I do! That's why I want you away from Cairnside, away from Monkshood, away from me!'

'Because of - Jennifer!' Melanie's words were soft with feeling.

'Because of Jennifer, yes!' he muttered harshly. 'And because you play a game that has no rules!'

'What do you mean?' Melanie stared at him.

'I mean that mockery of an engagement that you have with Michael Croxley!'

Melanie's lips trembled. 'Michael and I are no longer engaged.'

His eyes narrowed disbelievingly. 'You're not serious!'

'Of course I'm serious. It was, as you said, a mock­ery.'

'Oh, *Melanie’* He said the word in a tormented voice. 'For God's sake, sell me Monkshood! Have done with this place once and for all!'

Melanie hugged herself tightly. Do you want me to go so badly?'

Sean closed his eyes for a moment as though to shut out the picture of her and then he stepped towards her, taking one of her hands and raising it to his lips, palm uppermost. His mouth was warm and more gentle than she had ever known it, and when his kiss touched the network of veins on the inner side of her wrist, she quivered expectantly,

With unhurried expertise, he slid his hand up her arm inside the wide sleeve of her robe, caressing the soft flesh with rhythmic insistence. Melanie looked up at him, her breath caught in her throat, and he allowed his eyes to travel down the length of her, only returning to rest on her mouth with the almost tangible pressure of a kiss.

'You see,' he said, his tone thickening, 'I'm not always so barbaric. Are you frightened of me?'

'Of myself, perhaps,' she answered huskily.

You frighten me!' he muttered, in a harder tone. Yes, Melanie, you frighten me! When I'm with you I want to forget where duty lies, I want to forget what's expected of me, and take a chance on my immortal soul!'

With an exclamation, he pushed her away from him, and while she stood there shaken to the core he walked to the door. 'Take my advice,' he said harshly. 'Leave Caimside! Before something happens that we will both regret.'

Melanie was hurt and in her hurt she wanted to hurt him, too. 'What do you mean?' she demanded unsteadily. 'Will history repeat itself? Are you in fact your father's son?'

He stared at her for a long bitter moment, and then without another word he went out, slamming the door behind him.

Melanie sank down weakly on to the bed, burying her face in her hands. Why, oh, why had she said that? That was the unforgivable, and Sean would not forget or for­give. She smoothed the tears from her cheeks with trem­bling fingers. She had run away from London, from a situation there that she could not handle; how could she run away from Cairnside for the same reasons? Was she never to stop running?

Later in the morning, after she had breakfasted on coffee and nothing else, she encountered Jeffrey in the hall.

'Oh, hi there,' he said. 'I was looking for you. Are you ready?'

'Ready? Ready for what?' Melanie frowned.

Jeffrey gave her a playful pat on the shoulder. 'To go to Lochside, of course.'

'Lochside?' Melanie felt particularly dense.

'Jennifer's home. At the other end of the village. Sean asked me to take you. You did want to see Jennie, didn't you?'

*Jennifer!*

Melanie's conscience smote her. Forcing a smile to her lips, she exclaimed: 'Of course I did. I had no idea of the name of the house. Do we go now?'

'It's as good a time as any. I have to be back to open up the bar at eleven-thirty.'

'All right. Wait for me.'

Melanie ran upstairs and donned her sheepskin coat over the warm pants and sweater she was wearing. She didn't bother to put on any make-up, and her cheeks looked a little pale.

However, Jeffrey didn't seem to notice, and they got into Melanie's small saloon to drive to the Craigs' home.

Lochside was a house similar in size to Monkshood, but infinitely more comfortable. Central heating had been in­ stalled and there were fitted carpets everywhere.

They entered into a fight oak panelled hall, and as they closed the door a woman came out of a room to the right to greet them. She was not a young woman, Melanie judged her to be in her early sixties, but she had a young face. Her hair was long and coiled into a bun on the nape of her neck, and her clothes were inclined to drabness. Melanie assumed that this was Jennifer's mother, but Jeffrey disabused her at once with disturbing words.

'Hello, Mother,' he said. 'I'd like you to meet Melanie Stewart. Melanie, this is my mother.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

To say Melanie was flabbergasted was not to over­estimate her reaction. She stared at the woman as though she could not believe her eyes and she scarcely noticed what she was doing as she shook hands politely.

'So you're Melanie,' said Airs. Bothwell, with a faint smile. 'Jennifer's talked a lot about you.'

Melanie dragged her attention back to what was going on and smiled apologetically. 'I'm sorry. Yes - yes, I'm Melanie. I - I - I'm sorry if I seem taken aback. I - I thought you must be Jennifer's mother.'

'Jennifer's mother died many years ago,' replied Mrs. Bothwell, quietly. 'Jeffrey, Mr. Craig is down at the boat- house. He suggested you might like to join him.'

Jeffrey thrust his hands into the pockets of his parka. 'Okay. See you later, Melanie.'

'Yes.' Melanie nodded and as Jeffrey disappeared out of the door again, she accompanied Mrs. Bothwell across the hall and into a booklined study.

'I thought we might have coffee before you see Jennifer,' the older woman said gently. 'Excuse me a moment, and I'll get the tray.'

Melanie smiled again and the woman left her. Only then did Melanie expel her breath on a long sigh. She had never dreamed that Sean's mother might still be alive. He had never mentioned it and somehow she had assumed she was dead. To discover her here, in the Craigs' house, was rather disconcerting. In what capacity was she stay­ing here? And for how long?

Her speculations were cut off by the return of Mrs. Bothwell carrying a tray on which rested a jug of coffee and two cups. Melanie cleared a space on the paper- strewn surface of the desk which occupied the space under the window and Mrs. Bothwell thanked her.

'Cream and sugar?' she asked.

Melanie shook her head. 'Just cream, thank you.'

'There you are, then.'

Melanie took the cup that was offered her and ac­cepted Mrs. Bothwell's indication that she should sit down. She sensed that there was more to this interview than a desire on Mrs. Bothwell's behalf to offer her a morning beverage, and her nerves tautened. After that scene with Sean she was in no condition to stand another with his mother.

Then she thrust these thoughts aside. She was be­coming over-imaginative. Just because she was invited to share a morning drink with his mother it did not mean anything more than courtesy.

'Sean tells mc you're hoping to re-open Monkshood.'

Melanie's cup clattered into its saucer. 'Yes,' she said, cautiously. 'I - I write, you see. Actually, my occupation at the moment is not writing, but that's my ambition. I'm lucky enough to be able to work anywhere.'

'I see.' Mrs. Bothwell frowned. 'And you're going to use Monkshood for that purpose?'

'Yes.'

'You're sure you'll like living there alone? It's a large house for a young girl like yourself.'

Melanie stirred her coffee unnecessarily. 'Being alone doesn't bother me. Actually, it's the first house I've ever lived in. I'm quite looking forward to it.'

'You didn't know your great-uncle, did you?'

'No, I'm afraid not.' Melanie looked regretful.

'But you have learned a little about him since you came here?'

'Oh, yes.' Melanie moved restlessly. 'This is a nice room. Does Mr. Craig work here?'

'Yes. It's his study. He looks after the affairs of his tenants here. Mr. Craig owns quite a large estate.' Mrs. Bothwell spoke automatically, but Melanie could sense that her thoughts were not with what she was saying. It was disturbing to know that her earlier intuition about this interview had not been misplaced.

Finishing her coffee, she rose determinedly to her feet. 'That was delicious, Mrs. Bothwell. Now, may I see Jen­nifer?'

Mis. Bothwell rose also, standing down her coffee cup. 'I - I suppose so,' she agreed. 'Come this way.'

They went up the staircase that curved in a gracious sweep from the hall below and approached a room on the first landing. Inside, there was a clinical atmosphere, en­hanced by the aroma of antiseptic and liniment. Several bottles stood on a table beside the large bed, and looking rather lost among the starkness of the white sheets lay Jennifer.

Since Melanie had seen her last, she seemed to have aged considerably, and the gauntness which had always been there had been pared away almost to the point of emaciation.

However, when she saw Melanie, her eyes brightened considerably, and she attempted to raise herself up on one elbow to see her more fully.

'Melanie!' she exclaimed weakly. 'You've come to see me! How good of you. Sit down, sit down. Naomi, a chair for Melanie, please.'

Mrs. Bothwell's expression was gentle. 'Now don't excite yourself, Jennifer, or you'll only start coughing again. I'll get Miss Stewart a chair. Do you want any­ thing?'

Jennifer shook her head, and presently Mrs. Bothwell touched Melanie's arm to show her the chair behind her. Then, with a reluctant glance at the patient, she went out, closing the door firmly behind her.

'How are you?' Melanie asked, leaning towards the other girl.

Jennifer shrugged. 'As well as can be expected, of course. How are you? You look fine. I was surprised and' pleased when Sean told me you'd come back. Have you come to stay at Monkshood?'

Melanie bit her lip. 'No — no, at the hotel. I - er - I wanted to make sure everything was okay here.'

'I see.' Jennifer nodded. 'Is your fiance with you?'

Melanie sighed. What could she say? 'No,' she answered now. 'No, Michael's in London. We - er - we're having difficulties, actually. I - I don't know whether we're getting married or not.' It was easier to sound unde­cided than to be absolutely definite and so arouse a whole new series of questions.

'Oh, I am sorry.' Jennifer squeezed her hand sym­pathetically. 'But I'm sure everything will turn out all right.'

Melanie smiled. It was less demanding than some con­trite comment.

'Do you think you will decide to keep Monkshood?' Jennifer suddenly returned to the subject Melanie most wanted to avoid. 'I - I wanted to talk to you about that.'

'Do you think you should? Talk so much, I mean?' Melanie spread her fingers awkwardly. 'Tell me about yourself. What have you been doing?'

Jennifer sighed. 'I've done nothing of any importance. Melanie, please, I do want to talk about Monkshood. Someone should talk to you about it.'

Melanie turned her head helplessly, and Jennifer went on: 'Sean never will, and although Naomi might try to, she could never explain entirely.'

Melanie bit her lip. 'I know about - about my great- uncle being Sean's father.'

Jennifer nodded. 'I know you do. Sean told me.' She plucked at the bedcover. 'But I don't suppose you know the story.'

Melanie was interested in spite of herself, but still she hung back. 'Do you think you should tell me something that - that - well, doesn't concern me?'

'But it does concern you,' exclaimed Jennifer. 'That's the point. First of all, Sean's mother is not the woman you saw downstairs.'

'What!' Melanie was hopelessly confused now.

"Naomi is the mother of Jeffrey and Helen. She was Andrew Bothwell's second wife. He divorced Sean's mother after Sean was born. She is still alive, but she doesn't live here. She lives in Edinburgh.'

Melanie was now completely absorbed by the story. "You mean Andrew Bothwell divorced Sean's mother be­cause of Sean?'

"Yes - and no.' Jennifer coughed a little and Melanie helped her to some water before she went on. 'You see, it was wartime, and Angus Cairney was a naval officer. He only came home for a short period, on leave, and he and Sean's mother met and fell in love. But she was married, she had no children, it's true, but she was still tied to Andrew Bothwell.' She bit hard at her lower lip. 'When Angus returned to his ship, Linda - that's Sean's mother's name - Linda found she was pregnant. She was afraid, I suppose, like any other woman in her position, par­ticularly as Andrew was rather an austere man, and could not have been the father. Do you understand me?'

Melanie nodded, her brows drawn together.

'Well, maybe she was a fool for not writing to Angus, but she didn't. And in time, when Andrew found out, he allowed everyone in the village to believe it was his child. Then Sean was born.' Jennifer smiled faintly. 'When Andrew saw the son that might have been his, I think he went a little mad. He accused Linda of adultery in the cruellest possible way, and deprived her of the child. She couldn't prove he was not the father without involving Angus, of course, and he was thousands of miles away, dead for all she knew in that time of naval battles and war casualties.'

Melanie stared at the girl helplessly. 'So Andrew Both- well kept the child?'

'Yes.' Jennifer's thin fingers moved agitatedly. 'Any court would have made the same decision at that time. Linda was practically branded as a scarlet woman, and she left Cairnside.'

'But when Angus came back - didn't he find out?'

Jennifer sighed regretfully. 'Angus came back six years later, by which time Linda had qualified as a state regis­tered nurse at a hospital in Edinburgh, and Sean was very much Andrew's son. He didn't know, you see. He didn't find out until much later.'

"But how did he find out?'

Jennifer smiled then, a sad, wistful smile. 'The re­semblance began to strike people. Angus Cairney was a man like Sean, they had similar bone structure, and people began to talk. Andrew lost his temper and it all came out.'

'I see.' Melanie shook her head. 'And by then his father had married again and had two more children.'

'His adoptive father - yes.' Jennifer shrugged her thin shoulders. 'You can imagine how Sean felt. He was abso­lutely staggered. He went to see his mother, of course, and in spite of the gap of years they took to one another at once.'

'And Andrew Bothwell?'

'Well, he still maintained Sean as his son, and when he died three years ago he made Sean his heir. But by then, Angus and Scan were good friends, and although there was no question of Angus and Linda ever being more than acquaintances after all that time, there was a certain affiliation between the three of them.'

'So that was how Angus came to make that will. He must have made it before - before he knew—'

'He did. Melanie, have you any idea of the suffering Linda has gone through? To be deprived of her only offspring in such a terrible manner, almost at his birth!'

Melanie shook her head. 'It must have had a disastrous effect on her.'

'It did. And Sean appreciates this. With his innate understanding of the situation, he can sympathize with the awful choice she had to make.' Jennifer tugged at a corner of her pillow. 'And that's why I wanted you to know, because that's why Sean wants Monkshood.' She sighed. 'Linda wouldn't come back here, not while Andrew was alive, and even after his death she wouldn't live at the hotel. But Angus's house - the house where Sean was conceived - that's something else again.'

Melanie got unsteadily to her feet. 'You mean Sean wants Monkshood for his mother?'

'That's right.'

'But - but if only he'd told me—'

'He never would. I knew that,' answered Jennifer, rather weakly. 'He would never beg, that's not his way. He wanted the decision made without any entanglement of sentimentality on your part. But I - I couldn't let it happen. Not without trying to explain...'

Melanie felt bewildered. 'I'm so glad you did,' she said fervently. 'I should have guessed, I suppose, that there was something more than mere longing to own the house behind his offer.' She turned back to Jennifer. 'Don't worry, Sean shall have the house.'

'You won't - I mean—' Jennifer looked spent.

'Tell him you've told me? No.' Melanie shook her head. 'I shan't betray your confidence.'

'Thank you.' Jennifer was relieved.

'By the way,' Melanie fingered the back of the chair she had been sitting in, 'why is Mrs. Bothwell here?'

'Jeff's mother?' Jennifer lifted her shoulders. 'She's my father's housekeeper. After Andrew died and Sean in­herited the hotel she wanted somewhere else to live and as my mother was dead and we needed a housekeeper, it seemed the ideal solution.'

'And does she—?'

'Know the story? Oh, yes,' Jennifer nodded. 'She and Linda are much of an age. I think sometimes she feels badly about it, too.'

Melanie could understand that, her own brain buzzing with the implications of what she had just learned.

Suddenly the door opened and Naomi Bothwell ap­peared. 'I think Miss Stewart has been here long enough, Jennifer,' she said gently. 'After all, the doctor did say your visitors had to be limited.'

Jennifer smiled in rather a satisfied way. 'That's all right, Naomi,' she said. 'Melanie and I have finished our conversation, haven't we, Melanie?'

Melanie nodded. 'Yes. Yes, of course. I'd better go. I'll see you again, Jennifer!'

'Yes, do that,' she answered tiredly, and Melanie ac- companied the older woman out of the room and down the stairs to the hall.

Jeffrey awaited them, and if Naomi was disappointed that she was not to have the chance to question their visitor further Melanie was not. She had no desire to hear any more about Monkshood at the moment.

In her car driving back to the hotel, Jeffrey looked at her questioningly. You look - shocked, somehow,' he said. 'What happened? Is Jennifer worse? I suppose I should have gone up to see her, but I'm not much good at that sort of thing.'

Melanie gathered her wits. 'No - no, Jennifer's just the same,' she said. 'I -1 guess I'm cold, that's all.'

After lunch Melanie sought the sanctuary of her room. The casual conversation with the four elderly residents had been a tremendous strain on her resources and she felt tired both physically and mentally. She needed time to think, too; time to decide what she could do and where she could go if she left Cairnside.

She stood at her window, staring out on to the court­yard of the hotel with concentrated effort. Unless she was to despise herself for the rest of her life, her only course of action was to return to London. Anywhere else was im­possible. She had come here to escape Michael's per­sistence, but compared to the situation here Michael's attitude seemed a small thing to control.

In many ways it was a decision she was glad to make. After all, after discovering the strength of her feelings for Sean Bothwell it was not fair to either of them to stay here in any case. Even at Monkshood she was too close for comfort. What had he meant when he had urged her to leave? That he found her physically attractive, and nothing more? That he did not trust himself for these reasons? Or was it simply that he was using any means within his power to get her to leave the house?

She didn't know. She had no way of finding out. And now, in any case, he could never leave Jennifer.

Towards the end of that dreadful day, Melanie rang the solicitors in Fort William and made an appointment to see them the following morning. Then she packed all her belongings except those that she would need over­night and went down for dinner. She would leave first thing in the morning, before breakfast, and thus avoid unnecessary explanations. The solicitors could do the ex­plaining for her.

She scarcely touched her meal, and remained in a state of lethargy at her table until the maid came to clear. Then she rose and smiling at the girl went out into the hall. As she did so, Sean came in from outside, wearing a thick blue parka, his hair lightly flecked with flakes of snow.

Melanie wanted to shrivel up at the look he cast in her direction, before he said: 'It's snowing again. Do you want to put your car in the garage?'

Melanie cleared her throat. 'Er - no, thank you,' she replied. She could scarcely leave undetected if she had to extract her car from his garage in the morning.

Sean frowned. 'I would suggest you reconsider,' he said. 'It can easily be retrieved when you need it again.'

Melanie squeezed her hands together behind her back. 'Don't worry, Mr. Bothwell. I leave it out quite often at home and it takes little harm.' She began to walk towards the stairs.

*'Melanie!'* His voice halted her, and she turned slowly to face him.

'Yes?'

You saw Jennifer this morning?' 'Yes, Jeffrey took me.'

'I know. I asked him to.' Sean's face was taut, the muscles deeply engraved. 'What did you think of her?'

Melanie coloured. 'I - she - I was shocked by her ap­pearance.'

'Did she mention - Monkshood?'

Melanie's colour deepened. "Yes.'

'And what did you tell her?'

Melanie heaved a shaking sigh. 'I - I told her I had come to see the property. Like you said.'

'Did you tell her of your broken engagement?'

'Not exactly.' Melanie gripped the handrail. 'Look, you can set your mind at rest. I said nothing out of place.'

Sean unzipped his parka. 'Come and have a drink with me!'he said curtly.

Melanie swallowed hard. 'I'd rather not.'

'Why?'

'I don't think it would be right.'

'Why?' He crossed the hall towards her. 'I have no ulterior motives for asking.' His eyes bored down into hers with brooding intensity. 'I am denying myself so much, must I always beg for what I want?'

Melanie turned her head away. 'I have things to do,' she said.

'Have you visited the house today?'

*'No!'* The word was torn from her.

'Were you not interested?'

'Oh, Sean, *please*!' Melanie could not stand much more of this without confronting him with her new knowledge, without blurting out the hopelessness of her love for him, and earning once and for all his worst opinion of her.

Without another word, she ran up the stairs, leaving him there in the hall, staring up the stairs after her.

In the morning, in the still cold hours before dawn, Melanie left the hotel. To her immense relief her car started without difficulty, the snow of the night before having given way to a hard frost.

She drove away without a backward glance, the tight­ness in her chest nearly stifling her.

'Melanie! Where are those sketches for the alphabet series?'

Desmond Graham came into Melanie's studio one morning a couple of months later looking rather agi­tated.

Melanie slid off her stool and flicked through a pile of drawings on the end of her board. 'Here we are,' she said, handing them to him. 'You look flustered! What's wrong?'

Desmond took time to grin at her. 'There's nothing wrong, sweetie. It's Mr. Harwell himself. He wants to see them. Seems like you're making a small reputation for yourself.'

James Harwell was the managing director of a group of companies of which Desmond Graham Publishing was a subsidiary.

'How nice!' Melanie said now, trying to sound as en­thusiastic as Desmond expected her to. Once this news would have sent her into raptures of delight that at last her work was being recognized, but of late her work had become merely a way of numbing her mind to other thoughts.

Desmond disappeared with the sheaf of drawings and Melanie returned to her present occupation, that of illus­trating a series of captions which when filmed in sequence would create their first cartoon, a new venture which Des­mond was exploring. Always on the alert for new fields of development, he had suggested the idea to Melanie and she had agreed to use one of her own stories for this experiment. It was an absorbing if somewhat tiring occu­pation, but Melanie didn't mind. The minute differences evident in each subsequent drawing required the utmost attention to detail and while she was working she could forget the emotional strains which sometimes threatened to destroy her.

Even so, in the silence of her flat, it was impossible to forget, and she knew that only time would ease the un­bearable loneliness that engulfed her.

Since leaving Scotland she had heard nothing from Cairnside. On her way south she had seen the solicitors in Fort William and arranged the transfer of Monkshood to Sean, leaving the solicitors to settle all the details them­selves. She was sure they thought she was mad turning over such a property to someone who was not even a relative, but they kept their opinions to themselves. She had thought Sean might write to her after he learned what she had done, but when he didn't she told herself she was glad. This way there was no tenuous connection left and she could put all remembrance of it out of her mind.

Of Michael she had seen a little. Dining with Desmond she sometimes encountered him also dining with a client, and once she saw him with Virginia Bradbury. After this occasion he met her from work one evening and took her for a drink and Melanie realized he wanted to explain why he had been out with another woman. It was then, when she showed absolutely no interest, that he realized once and for all that what had been between them was over.

During the afternoon, Desmond came to tell her that Mr. Harwell had been very impressed with her work.

'He wants you to try something else,' he said. 'Adver­tising. Does it appeal to you?'

'Advertising?' Melanie shook her head.

'Yes. Animated advertising. The kind of thing you're doing now, with definite products in mind instead of stories.'

Melanie sighed. 'I see.'

'You're not impressed?' Desmond was disappointed.

'Oh, you know me, Desmond,' Melanie exclaimed, con­trite. 'Lately nothing seems important any more.'

Desmond chewed impatiently on his cigar. He had guessed long ago why Melanie had become so morose. 'You've got to pull yourself together, girl. You can't go on like this indefinitely. This man - this Scan Bothwell - could be married by now!'

'Don't you think I know that?' cried Melanie pain­fully.

'Well, then ... Melanie, for God's sake, no one can help you but yourself. No amount of self-pity will bring him back. If you can't stand the uncertainty, go to Scotland, see him, married or otherwise; find your peace of mind.'

*'No!'* Melanie was horrified. 'I couldn't do that!'

"Very well, then. Pull yourself together.' Desmond's ex­pression softened. 'Honey, I'm being cruel to be kind. You know that.'

'I know.' Melanie pressed her lips together regretfully. 'All right, Desmond. I'll think it over. About the adver­tising, I mean.'

'Good.'

Desmond patted her shoulder and left her, and Mel­anie slid off her stool and reached for her coat. Another long evening at the flat awaited her and she opened her mouth to call Desmond back. She had spent several even­ings at the Grahams' home and tonight she felt in need of company, but Desmond had gone into his office and the moment passed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

She arrived back at her flat about six, going up the stairs to her floor searching in her handbag for her key. A sound from above startled her, however, and she looked up to see a dark shadow at the top of the stairs.

Her mind cried out that she was having hallucinations; that the shadow she could see was a figment of her im­agination, but she could not go any further without crying tremulously:

'Who - who is it? Who's there?'

The shadow detached itself from the gloom at the stairhead and moved into the light and her eyes widened disbelievingly. It was true; she was having delusions. That could not be Sean at the top of the stairs; it simply could not be!

Turning, suppressing a choking sob, she turned and fled back down the stairs, the sound of footsteps following her like some devil's tread in her ears.

She had reached the outer door when he caught her, and grasping her wrist prevented her from pulling the heavy door open. He was panting almost as much as she was and he dragged her round to face him roughly.

'For God's sake, Melanie,' he muttered huskily, 'what the hell do you think you're doing?'

Melanie hung back away from him, still not firmly con­vinced that this whole incident was not merely happening in the desperate corridors of her mind.

But even as she looked at him in the subdued hall light­ing she saw that this was not the Sean Bothwell she re­membered. Now his face and body were much thinner and there were dark lines about his eyes which seemed to have sunk further into their sockets. His hair was uncut and unkempt as though he had been running restless fingers through its thickness continuously and there were threads of grey where there had not been before.

And yet, for all that, he was the same man whose sole presence could reduce her to a trembling mass of nerves and emotions and almost wanton desire...

'Sean,' she said at last, when his eyes had narrowed somewhat bitterly at her strained appraisal. 'Sean, what are you doing here?'

Sean released her, thrusting his hands deep into the pockets of his dark overcoat. 'I came to see you. To try and get some answers to some questions,' he replied tautly.

Melanie tucked her hair behind her ears. 'You sound so grim. Try to understand how I felt a moment ago. I thought you were an hallucination. I couldn't believe - it was you there — on the stairs.'

'You expect me to believe that?'

'It's the truth, Scan, believe me!' She touched his sleeve tentatively. 'What questions have you to ask me?'

Sean raked a hand through his hair. 'I think it might be better if I contacted your solicitors,' he muttered harshly.

Melanie felt the first beginnings of a chill in her sto­mach.

'I - I see.' She glanced round awkwardly. 'Won't - won't you come back up to the apartment? I - well, I'm sure you'd like a drink.'

Sean looked at her broodingly. 'I'm not sure that's a good idea,' he said. 'You're - you're looking well. Still working hard, I suppose.'

‘Yes.' Melanie hated the stiltedness of his remarks. 'Oh, please, Sean, come up to the apartment. I'm - I'm sorry if you thought I was - well, stupid! But I guess I've had a hard day. I - I'm tired, that's all.'

'Then I'd better go, hadn't I?' Sean lifted his shoulders wearily.

'Sean, for goodness' sake! Don't speak to me like this!' Melanie's voice broke. 'Please, please don't go—'

Sean stared at her for a long moment and then it was as though the iron self-control he had imposed upon himself for so long snapped and he caught her by the shoulders and pulled her to him, his mouth seeking hers with passionate hunger.

Melanie clung to him tightly, responding without any thought of reserve, unable in that moment to think of anything but Sean and her urgent need of him.

But then, through the tormented veils of her mind, came the realization that Sean's restraint must have been because of Jennifer, and remorse overcame her. With a choking sound, she pushed him away, and stood swaying unsteadily.

'Oh, Sean,' she said, scraping her hands across her cheeks so that he should not see the hot tears which had overspilled her eyes. 'We can't do this! Why have you come here?'

Sean stared at her, breathing swiftly. 'Melanie, for God's sake, don't play games with me! Not now.'

Melanie gulped. This was the moment of truth and she could not face it. She could not allow him to do some­thing which ever afterwards he would blame her for. She wanted him-oh, how she wanted him; she wanted to hold him in her arms and smooth away all those lines of strain from his face, to feel the passionate urgency of his desire and to satisfy him in a way that only complete surrender could achieve. She wanted all those things, but not at the expense of Jennifer.

And like the coward that she was, she ran away again, up the stairs to her apartment, flinging herself into the living-room with violent self-loathing.

But this time Sean had followed her and when he closed the living-room door, she knew her days of running were over.

'Melanie,' he said, his voice taut and strained. 'Mel­anie, why did you turn Monkshood over to me?'

Melanie panicked. Does it matter? It's yours now. I don't want it. Not any part of it.'

'Did you think I would take it, just like that?' His tone was insistent.

Melanie frowned. 'What do you mean?'

"Why did you run away?'

'So many questions,' she exclaimed bitterly. 'Sean, you have no right to be here.'

'Why?' His expression darkened and he crossed the room to stand in front of her, his body only inches from hers. 'Tell me why? Tell me that what happened down­stairs was only play-acting on your behalf and I'll prove to you that it was not.'

His hand slid across her shoulder to cup her neck. 'Such soft skin,' he murmured huskily. Do you know the thought of you has almost driven me mad these past weeks!'

*'Sean!'* she protested, turning her head away.

His eyes narrowed. 'What is it? Has Groxley ap­proached you again?' He twisted her bare finger between his own.

'No, *no*!' Melanie was desperate, her self-imposed need to escape from him rapidly dispersing beneath his dis­turbing personality. 'I - I'm not the kind of woman you think I am. I want you to go.'

'What kind of a woman do I think you are?' he de­manded huskily. 'Oh, Melanie, I'm beginning to believe die impossible can be true. Tell me one thing, why did you run away? Was it because you were giving Monks­hood to me, or was it what I believed: that after what happened between us you wanted no part of me?'

Melanie's brows drew together. 'Sean, you must know that it was Jennifer—'

His expression softened. 'It was Jennifer,' he said heavily, almost to himself. 'Melanie, Jennifer is dead.'

'What!'

Melanie stared at him in dismay. Jennifer - dead? It didn't seem possible.

'But - but when?' she stammered.

'Six weeks ago.'

Melanie swallowed hard. 'So that's why—' She bit her lip. 'Your loss of weight - those lines of strain - I thought ...' Her voice tailed away.

He took her by the shoulders and regarded her intently. 'Melanie, if I have lost weight, if there are lines of strain upon my face, then it surely is not only Jennifer. It's six weeks since she died. Six weeks in which I've suffered the most rigorous agonies any man could suffer. Do you know what you did when you ran away? You made me realize that all the mean and selfish things I'd done and said to you would torment me for the rest of my days and I had no hope of ever being able to tell you how I felt. As you say, there was Jennifer, and I couldn't desert her.'

'Sean-'

'Wait a minute.' He continued to hold her with his gaze. 'There's more. My reasons for getting involved with Jennifer were not wholly personal ones. Recently - a few days ago, in fact - I found out that you know about my mother, about the whole rotten story. Well, that's partly why I felt such a debt to the Graigs. At the time my mother was degraded by my - well, by Andrew Bothwell - only Adrian Craig and his wife would help her. They were responsible for her finding a home in Edinburgh and they supported her until she could support herself. I felt deeply indebted to them all along the line. I was re­sponsible, you see. Oh, I realize I'm not morally re­sponsible, but without me life would have been so much easier for my mother. Jennifer and I always got along well together and when I found out first about my re­lationship with Angus I got the idea into my head that no decent girl would ever consider me as a prospective hus­band. I was little more than a boy in those days, and it meant a great deal to me when Jennifer gave me her affection and support. Can you understand? I could never have betrayed that affection.'

Melanie nodded mutely, and he went on:

'But after you came and the business over Monkshood blew up I began to realize that my feelings towards you were not motivated by hate but by that other emotion that can so easily be confused with it, love!'

Melanie shook her head. 'But - but - you waited all this time. I mean - couldn't you have told me Jennifer was dead? It was something I could have shared with you. I liked her so much.'

'Yes, it was a tragedy, and although she had never been strong and this last illness weakened her terribly, it was still a shock to us all. I felt guilt, too. I felt as though my terrible need for you was to blame. Only afterwards the doctors explained that she had had an incurable lung complaint that no amount of rest or nursing would ever cure.'

Melanie shook her head, thinking for a moment of the gentle strength of the other girl.

'Jennifer told you about my mother, didn't she?' Sean was saying now. 'If only I'd known! I thought - oh, I don't know what I thought. I think I did hate you at that time when I discovered you had left me without even saying good-bye.'

'But how did you find out that I knew?' Melanie was puzzled.

'Naomi told me. Jennifer had told her, you see, after you had gone. But she had sworn her to secrecy, and it was only by accident that I overheard Jeff and his mother talking together about me.' He shook his head. 'They were worried about me, I think, and about my reactions to your giving me Monkshood.'

'What do you mean?'

'What do you think I mean? I couldn't accept it, you must know that.'

'But why?' Melanie stared at him with troubled eyes.

'The house is valuable. Not as valuable as Croxley would have had me believe, but valuable even so. As I said before, I'll buy the house from you. That's why I'm here.'

Melanie's eyes widened. 'Is that the only reason?'

'That's up to you.' Sean was controlled now.

'What do you mean?'

'What do you think I mean? For God's sake, Melanie, do you want me to go down on my bended knees and tell you I love you - I adore you - I can't live without you!'

Melanie's lips trembled. That was quite a picture. The arrogant Borderer going down on his knees and begging when all he had to do was command.

'Oh, Sean,' she whispered huskily. 'Just take me in your arms and love me. I don't know how you can imagine I could feel any other way.'

Sean stared at her for a moment longer and then he pressed her to him, his hands on her hips, his mouth searching and finding her mouth, exploring it with satis­fying intensity.

When he drew back, Melanie clung to him reluctantly, .mil he said, rather thickly: 'I'm only human, Melanie. And I want you very much. But not here - not like this. I want to marry you.'

'And if I refuse?'Her lips were soft and bruised.

His eyes darkened brilliantly. 'But you won't?'

'I'll make a bargain with you,' she whispered, and as he looked questioningly at her, she said: 'It has to do with our mutual property. If you could see your way clear to-'

'Oh, Melanie!' He leant his forehead against hers. 'All right, all right, my mother shall live at Monkshood, just as I planned. Do you think you could stand to live at the Black Bull until we can afford to buy our own house?'

Melanie shivered with excitement. 'I think I could stand it,' she murmured, touching his cheek with light fingers.

It was like Desmond had said. When one was marrying the man one loved, one didn't question trivialities ...